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Darfur: Necessary Knowledge for Effective Action

In the spring of 2004, at the height of the brutal offensives by the Sudanese army and airforce and Janjawiid militia in Darfur, I wrote an article entitled “Counterinsurgency on the Cheap.” In it, I wrote,

“this is not the genocidal campaign of a government at the height of its ideological hubris, as the 1992 *jihad* against the Nuba was, or coldly determined to secure natural resources, as when it sought to clear the oilfields of southern Sudan of their troublesome inhabitants. This is the routine cruelty of a security cabal, its humanity withered by years in power: it is genocide by force of habit.”

My point was that the atrocities in Darfur had both similarities with, and differences from, the military campaigns with which we had become so wearily familiar over the previous twenty years of war in Sudan.

The motto of the Social Science Research Council is “necessary knowledge.” What do we need to know about Darfur and what does this necessary knowledge tell us about what we should do?

I shall make five main points about what we know and three recommendations for immediate action.

1. Darfur is the most recent instance of counterinsurgency in Sudan—a form of counterinsurgency that at its extreme moments crosses the line to become genocidal.
2. Darfur today is a shattered society in the aftermath of a genocidal counterinsurgency facing continued war and anarchy. To portray the situation as ongoing genocidal atrocity by the Sudan Government and Janjaweed against African civilians may have been more-or-less correct three years ago. Today, we need to depict Darfur differently.
3. What’s driving Sudan’s crisis is the combination of an extreme disparity in wealth and power between a central ruling elite and the provinces, combined with persisting instability within this ruling elite. It’s essential to understand both these realities because this understanding will determine how we deal with Sudan, both tactically and strategically. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement gives us a mechanism for tackling both of these core problems.

4. The human rights and humanitarian response has been effective but is not a solution. The relief response has kept many people alive.
5. Making progress towards peace and protection demands an international policy that is consistent, consensual and clear. Threats of military action are dangerous and counterproductive.

This analysis leads to three immediate actions. I do not promise a quick fix because no quick fix exists. But these steps can, I believe, make it possible to work fast towards peace and security for the people of Darfur.

1. Put the A team on the peace process. A real investment of effort in the peace process will make a vast difference.
2. Develop a security plan based on the realities of Darfur. The centerpiece of this should be integrating protection and local peacemaking.
3. Take coercive military operations off the agenda. Bellicose rhetoric is an obstacle to progress.

If these are done, we can revive a realistic peace process, we can plan for a protection force that will actually do a useful job, and we can apply sanctions and similar measures as required in pursuit of a set of solutions that are actually feasible. Those solutions must be today's solutions for today's and tomorrow's problems.

Necessary Knowledge 1: Darfur is the most recent instance of counterinsurgency in Sudan

Sadly, Darfur is not unique. Sudan's wars follow a pattern and Darfur is one instance of that pattern. Understanding that pattern allows us to understand what happened in 2003-04, what is happening today, what might happen next, and what can be done to resolve the problem.

Darfur is similar to the wars in the South and elsewhere in that an overstretched army and a dysfunctional government relied upon proxy militia to do their dirty work. In the South, numerous tribal militia and the Murahaliin Arab militia; in Darfur the Janjaweed. Similar in that this led to grotesquely violent attacks on civilian communities, including murder, rape, burning and looting. This is counterinsurgency taken to a genocidal extreme. Tens of thousands were murdered in Darfur. This is the way in which the Khartoum's military intelligence chiefs do their business. It is what they did in 2003 when the army was in full retreat in under the onslaught of the Darfur rebellion.

Darfur is different in that the motive is no longer ideological, not concerned with oil. It's mainly about power, and secondarily about ethnic and racial identity.

There are also similarities and differences in what happened *after* the 2003-04 offensives, when the government had stopped the immediate military threat posed by the rebels. Throughout Sudan's wars, the aftermath of a genocidal counterinsurgency campaign has been a fractured, demoralized and militarized society. After the peak of the violence comes hunger and disease, which kill many more. Then different forms of violence follow—nasty prolonged wars without clear front lines.

In these wars, the rebels fracture. Some of them are bought off and join the government. Some fight each other. Some become pawns of neighboring countries. They can be at times just as abusive as the pro-government militia.

In these wars, the government proxies continue their rampage outside the control of the government. They fight each other. Some defect to the other side. Many pursue narrow agendas of profit. The government tries to control the monster it has created by absorbing them into the army and bribing their leaders, but cannot completely succeed.

For the last two years in Darfur we have seen ineffective offensives by the government army against the rebels; Janjaweed and other militia attacks on rebels and civilian communities; rebels fighting each other; militia armed by the government fighting each other; and a lot of banditry. There's a war in Chad and a brewing war next door in Kordofan. Thousands were killed in 2005 and 2006 and we can expect the same in 2007.

The biggest difference between Darfur and Sudan's other wars is that Darfur has been the locus of an impressive and effective aid operation. Relief aid in Southern Sudan never reached more than a small fraction of the people in need. But in Darfur, in the last 18 months the data show that mortality levels among the people reached by humanitarian operations have been normal or close to normal. That is an extraordinary achievement. And in the areas not reached, things are not terrible—there's no famine in Darfur today. We know what a famine that kills 100,000 people looks like, and it doesn't look like Darfur today. This success is precarious—let's not do anything to jeopardize it.

Necessary Knowledge 2: Darfur today is a shattered society in the aftermath of a genocidal counterinsurgency facing continued war and anarchy

We need to know the contours of this horribly complicated problem. Simple thinking will lead to wrong responses. The reality cannot be condensed to a slogan for a poster. Darfur today is not a case of Arabs killing Africans, nor an attempt by the government to exterminate Darfur's non-Arab tribes, nor an intense famine in which we need to deliver aid under armed guard to save millions from starving to death in the next few months.

We must recognize what we do *not* have. There are no ongoing genocidal massacres. There is no famine. That's the good news.

Now, we must understand what we *do* face. We face a fragmented, militarized society with ongoing violence that could at any moment get worse. We have a monumental crime—the genocidal counterinsurgency of 2003-04—standing uncorrected. Millions are

displaced, hundreds of villages wholly or partly abandoned, millions traumatized. People in the camps say they are living without dignity, without anything that makes life meaningful. They were never wealthy. But in their villages they had some autonomy, some social reality. Now they are stripped of that. It is intensely demoralizing. The ethnic cleansing of 2003-04 must be corrected or the Darfurians will have lost their society.

Next, we have a multitude of armed groups, most of them armed by the government, none of them fully controlled. The old structures of civil and tribal administration have been destroyed. Many people in Darfur describe the situation as anarchy—that the government has failed in its primary responsibility to provide law and order.

We have a failed peace agreement that has only complicated and confused the situation. We have an African Union force that is regarded with bewilderment and contempt by most of the population because it has so signally failed to live up to expectations, and hasn't provided meaningful protection, despite its encouraging start three years ago.

We have the potential for new violence. There will be eruptions of localized new violence, new military offensives, and further banditry. If provoked, the government is likely to overreact again and initiate horrible new counterinsurgency, perhaps targeting the camps. If this happens, tens of thousands could die. The potential for violence in other parts of Sudan, such as neighboring Kordofan, should not be underestimated.

Necessary Knowledge 3: What's driving Sudan's crisis is the combination of an extreme disparity in wealth and power between the center and the provinces, combined with persisting instability within the ruling elite

If we focus on Darfur alone, the reality is confusing and demoralizing. There are no clear or quick solutions. If we look at Sudan as a whole, it's also true that there are no quick fixes. But we need to understand the roots of Sudan's crisis if we are to grapple with it.

What are the most salient features of Sudan, such that it has been the site of recurrent wars in its peripheries over the last 25 years? We can point to racial, ethnic and religious differences, the way in which civil local government has given way to militia rule, and competition for natural resources. But two elements stand out as drivers of the Sudanese crisis.

One is the disparity in wealth and power between centre and periphery. The facts are remarkable. The city of Khartoum dominates the national economy, with about half the nation's GDP concentrated there and most of the services—education, health, infrastructure. The capital and the surrounding area are like a middle-income nation, a boom town surrounded by a pre-developing country.

Economic inequality makes for political disparity. The money for political activities; the media; the educated people; the means of organizing political rallies—all are overwhelmingly present in the center and absent from the peripheries. Provincial politicians have long dreamed of exercising their demographic majority to take power.

They have never achieved it because they are dispersed, under-resourced, and disorganized. That's why they turn to violent rebellion. But it's also why the central authorities find it so easy to buy them off one-by-one. The central elite is very secure in power. With the oil boom it is becoming more secure—the national budget has risen by a factor of thirteen in nine years.

The best chance for the rural poor to attain equality in such a system is through free elections. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement schedules national elections for the 12 months following July 2008. The hope of the Darfur Peace Agreement lay not in its disappointing interim power-sharing provisions. It lay in the chance it gave the people of Darfur to organize politically and gain power, in only a few years, through the ballot box.

The second fact, less remarked upon, is the dysfunctionality of the government. This government possesses multiple centers of power. So did its predecessors. There's constant conspiracy and backstabbing. There are multiple security forces that can challenge the army. Khartoum's week-to-week diplomatic gossip concerns who has allied with whom to gain the upper hand on someone else. From a distance, the government looks like a master of Machiavellian maneuver. Close up, the reason for its persistent perfidy becomes clear: any agreement is good only as long as that particular power configuration stays intact.

Most of the energy in Khartoum's politics goes into internal intrigue. This means it's easy for President Omar al Bashir to say "no" to any outside initiative, but difficult to say "yes" to any peace proposal. He cannot run the risk of losing the support of key members of his regime. The ruling elite is collectively good at one thing only: hanging onto power.

Central instability is bad for any government. Combine it with extreme inequality and we have a recipe for endless war in the provinces. The government can fight wars but cannot win them and finds it incredibly difficult to stop them.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 is a mechanism for tackling both of these central problems. It provides for decentralization—especially but not only to Southern Sudan—and for democratic elections. It locks the central elites into a closely-monitored process of political transformation. The CPA is far from perfect and today is plunging into an avoidable crisis. The main reason for that crisis is Darfur. The Darfur war has paralyzed the internal politics of Sudan and also consumed international political, diplomatic and economic resources that would otherwise have gone into making the CPA work. We need to get back to making the CPA work, because if it fails, Sudan will face an even more terrible crisis.

Necessary Knowledge 4: The human rights and humanitarian response has been effective but is not a political solution.

Let's distinguish between two kinds of action. Human rights and humanitarian action is justified by basic principle. Political and security action must be judged by its outcome.

Campaigning for basic human rights is always justified and often effective. Exposing atrocities, giving profile and assistance to the victims, identifying the individuals responsible—all are core advocacy tasks. These tasks have been done thoroughly in Darfur. The case is before the International Criminal Court. That's a huge victory for the human rights campaigners. Those with criminal responsibility for atrocities should be prosecuted and punished.

Providing humanitarian assistance is similarly justified and essential. In Darfur this has been done remarkably successfully for more than two million displaced people. Let's not do anything that could jeopardize that success. If our concern is saving lives, the single best action is to sustain that relief effort.

Late last year, U.S. Government Accountability Office published a thorough review of estimates for mortality in Darfur. It is worth reading carefully as it shows the degree to which humanitarian operations can bring down mortality levels, even under extremely difficult conditions.

But human rights activism and humanitarian work cannot resolve the bigger political issues: how to achieve peace and security for the people of Darfur.

Necessary Knowledge 5: We have a good idea of what can work. A consistent, cohesive, consensual and clear international policy can yield results. Pressure works—but must be applied smartly. Military intervention would be dangerous and calling for it is damaging.

Political and security action on Sudan is justified if it works. Good analysis is essential, because bad analysis can lead to the wrong actions which only make matters worse. Dealing with Sudan is extraordinarily difficult. The problems are complicated, because the government is skilled at managing international pressure, and the government is internally dysfunctional. But we have some good experience of what can work.

In an appendix to this paper, I run over four examples which illustrate the complexities of changing policy and stopping abuses in Sudan. The most important example is international engagement to help bring the war in Southern Sudan to an end. There's no simple message. Pressure can deliver, that's not difficult to demonstrate. More important are the questions: what sort of pressure, by whom, in what context, and to what end?

International policies towards Sudan work when they are consistent. If the Sudan government is inherently unpredictable, we have to be super-predictable. That means consistent prioritization. It means not making empty threats—a point emphasized by John Prendergast which I need not repeat. It also means not making empty promises. For example, President George W. Bush promised strong support for the implementation of the Darfur Peace Agreement a year ago. The U.S. government didn't deliver.

Unilateral policies are much less effective than multilateral ones. The Southern Sudan peace process was effective in part because it was supported in the region, in Europe and

Asia, as well as by the U.S. And multilateralism doesn't mean a coalition of those who support the U.S. point of view—it means coming to agreement with others.

Unless our policy is regime change, the outcome needs to be something that the Sudan government can accept. That's not the same as what President Bashir wants—his calculations can be changed by pressure. But if he believes that the end result will be that he shares the same fate as Saddam Hussein, no amount of pressure will make him yield.

The North-South peace process shows that with international cohesion, a lot of leverage and a lot of persistence, one priority goal can be achieved. In Darfur, we have less cohesion, less leverage, we haven't been so persistent, and we have tried to achieve multiple goals, so it is unsurprising that the results have been disappointing.

Let me propose three measures to tackle Darfur. I don't want to imply that these are a "solution" or that they will "save" Darfur. I don't believe there is a straightforward solution and nor do I believe that foreigners can save Darfur. Only the people of Darfur, and other Sudanese, will "save" Darfur. Our job is to provide them with the opportunity to find those solutions. But implementing these three measures would mean, I believe, that it would be possible to move Darfur towards peace and civilian protection.

1. Put the A team on the peace process.

The international community shortchanged the negotiations that led to the Darfur Peace Agreement. The AU mediation was under-staffed and under-funded. The U.S. government and other western governments and the UN did not attach senior staff to the talks on a full-time basis and demanded unrealistic deadlines.

Far more effort was expended on trying to get Sudan to accept UN troops. Everyone agrees on a much stronger, better mandated security presence in Darfur. Rhetorically, peace and protection were equal goals. In practice, the peacekeeping force was the main event and the peace process got the leftovers. The same is happening now. There are new plans on the table for a revived peace process. But they won't work unless as much effort goes into peace as is going into standing up a UN force. And without a credible peace process, any peacekeeping force will end up, sooner rather than later, facing mission impossible.

2. Develop a security plan based on the realities in Darfur today.

The debate on the peacekeeping or protection force for Darfur has focused exclusively on legal and operational issues, including mandate, numbers, equipment, and command. These are important. But the core question has not been addressed: what is the strategic purpose of the mission?

The simple reality is that the capability of any international force will be severely limited. Many of us would wish for international troops that can disarm the Janjaweed, protect all civilians, and bring about peace and security. Realism dictates that we lower our

expectations. Without doubt, the AU mission is in crisis and as currently constituted cannot perform basic operations. Enhancement is essential. A bigger force that can patrol regularly, respond effectively when fired upon, monitor and follow up violations, and provide a visible presence in the IDP camps, will certainly make a difference. But effective civilian protection across wide swaths of Darfur, is a much more challenging task, which UN forces have very rarely accomplished elsewhere. Coercive disarmament, as has been tried in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, is very hazardous—and isn't envisioned. There's a very real risk that a UN force or an AU-UN hybrid would become an expensive ornament—a bystander to an ongoing crisis.

The key requirement is a well-informed and long-term mission plan. In the Nuba Mountains, in the wake of the 2002 ceasefire there, twenty unarmed ceasefire monitors did a better job at maintaining security for three years than a fully armed battalion of UN troops has done since. The reason was because the unarmed monitors worked smartly with the local communities, whereas the UN battalion has hidden behind its fortifications and failed to communicate with the people. There and in Darfur, security work and protection is 90% civilian and political work and only 10% force and the threat of force. John Prendergast used to call something very like this “frontline diplomacy.”

The troops will be in Darfur for at least five years. They cannot make peace or provide protection by force of arms. They can only operate with the consent of the great majority of the armed groups in Darfur. What's needed is a plan, based on detailed local knowledge, sustained by constant political liaison and community outreach. Controlling the threat of the great majority of armed groups—both Arabs and non-Arabs—can be done by agreement. A Darfur-wide consensus security plan will isolate those small hardline Janjaweed groups that will need to be controlled by robust action. Darfur's community leaders have been telling us this for some time, most recently in last week's preparatory meetings for the Darfur-Darfur Dialogue and Consultation. This is the plan we should be working on

3. Take coercive military action off the agenda.

I agree with the ENOUGH paper that declaring a no-fly zone or a beginning non-consensual deployment of ground troops would be an act of war that would immediately have immense negative consequences. Among other things it would cause humanitarian operations to be closed down, Sudanese military mobilization to be stepped up, and pre-emptive ethnic cleansing operations along likely access routes to be mounted.

I also agree with ENOUGH that there have been too many empty threats. Threats must be credibly actionable or they should not be made at all. For that reason, a “credible threat of military action” should be taken off the table.

Let me go further. In October last year, Tony Lake, Susan Rice and Donald Payne proposed military action against Sudan in an article in the *Washington Post*. They proposed air strikes and a blockade. Senator Joseph Biden has gone further: he says the U.S. should also commit ground forces to stop the Janjaweed.

John Prendergast's view, expressed in his Congressional testimony and the ENOUGH paper, has a nuance. The principal thrust is sanctions to make Khartoum comply with measures short of military intervention, such as deployment of a protection force. But ENOUGH also speaks of a credible threat of military action, should things deteriorate.

There is a subtle distinction between the Prendergast position and that adopted by his former colleagues in the Clinton Administration and the aspiring Democratic presidential candidate. But I fear that subtlety is lost on his intended target in Khartoum. Testifying to Congress, John Prendergast said that "the credible threat of military action will help alter the calculations of Khartoum officials very rapidly." I believe that the bellicose rhetoric has already had that effect. It has made Khartoum more belligerent, more hardline and less cooperative. This is not smart.

Several of those canvassing military action are former members of the Clinton Administration which had a policy of regime change in Sudan. So it's not surprising that Bashir feels that he is in Washington's gunsights, perhaps if there's a Democrat in the White House. Aggressive rhetoric from America is oxygen to the militants in Khartoum. Saying no is a cheap win for Bashir in the Arab world. Enough of these threats.

It would also be helpful to take a clear position on regime change. There is a legitimate mechanism for regime change, which is called elections. Any other method of regime change should, I submit, be taken off the agenda.

Moving Forward

We have a horrible and horribly complicated problem to help solve. The origin of the problem lies in Khartoum. The solution also lies there. However much it sticks in our throats, a way must be found to work with the government of Sudan. Pressure on Khartoum, both directly and indirectly, through China and Sudan's other friends in Asia and the Middle East, should be sustained. Pressure is already having an impact on China.

My concern is, pressure for what? A UN force is a tool to solve a problem. It is not a solution. Our pressure must be on the center of gravity of the problem itself. In Darfur, the twin centers of gravity are peace and security, and we have not had serious plans for either, or serious investment in achieving either. Investing our energies in pushing for a protection force to the neglect of these is a misdirection of limited political, diplomatic and advocacy resources. In Sudan as a whole, the center of gravity is the CPA.

We need to be a head of the curve, focusing on today's and tomorrow's problems, not yesterday's. With the primary focus on peace—with commensurate political, diplomatic and advocacy resources invested in peace—we can not only make progress towards political agreement but also stand a decent chance of getting a useful international peacekeeping and protection force on the ground in Darfur. This will need to include refocusing on the CPA and the many threats to it that are emerging. Let's not be caught sleeping on Kordofan, Abyei, Upper Nile, or the Khartoum displaced.