

Testimony of Omer Ismail,
Policy Advisor at the Enough Project
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Introduction:

I'd like to begin by thanking you, Congressman McGovern and Congressman Wolf, and members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, for convening this discussion on the situation in South Kordofan and Darfur. This hearing is of the utmost necessity and urgency, and you have repeatedly taken the lead in bringing attention to the human rights crises in these border areas of Sudan. As a native of Sudan and someone who has worked on emergency relief and human rights for over two decades, I thank you for your unwavering attention.

In January of this year, I appeared before the distinguished members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to give testimony regarding the historic January referendum that laid the groundwork for the independence of South Sudan in July. I noted that a successful transition toward two stable Sudans would hinge on agreement and engagement on several fronts: resolving the status of contentious border areas, a reprioritization of the conflict in Darfur, and US investment in the building blocks toward a more democratic future in Sudan. Many of us anticipated that these issues, left unaddressed and combined with anxieties on the ground and among the leadership of both governments, had the potential to spark violence. And now, in the wake of a relatively peaceful transition to independence for South Sudan, we are witnessing what we feared: continued human suffering due to a Khartoum-directed aggressive campaign against rebel forces and civilians, not only through on-the-ground violence and aerial bombardments but also through the use of food as a weapon of war.

Evidence of human rights crimes:

Nations and influential actors who are hesitant to react to the human rights crises in Sudan call for more evidence, but the reported evidence is already clear and undeniable. Just last Friday, a UNHCR statement noted that since the beginning of September, the steady number of refugees from the Nuba Mountains fleeing the fighting in South Kordofan has surged from about 100 a day in August to up to 500 people a day in September.¹ There are reports of ongoing aerial bombings in civilian areas controlled by the SPLM-North, bombings that often target villages with no military assets. Evidence gathered through Enough's Satellite Sentinel Project shows at least eight mass graves found in and around Kadugli, the capital of Southern Kordofan. Satellite imagery analysis also confirmed reports of a large population of internally displaced civilians seeking protection on the perimeter of the United U.N. facility in Kadugli. Several thousand civilians who had sheltered there were later reported missing and their whereabouts remain unknown.

¹ UNHCR, "Thousands Flee to South Sudan to escape South Kordofan," September 16, 2011. Available at <http://bit.ly/qTwCmd>.

In Darfur, since my previous testimony in January, the Sudanese government has increased aerial bombardments, displacing a further 70,000 people. Large areas of Darfur remain inaccessible to the relief agencies, which means that help cannot reach the victims. Furthermore, reporting and verification of violence becomes impossible when the area is cut off from humanitarians and even peacekeepers.

Fighting and aerial bombardments also continue in Blue Nile state, while international humanitarian efforts remain restricted by Khartoum.

Lack of international attention / Relation with Arab Spring:

Khartoum, fearing opposition rebel forces may form a coalition, has not shied away from slaughtering civilians in its effort to control the restive border areas. The policies so far adopted by the United States and the international community have manifestly fallen short of fostering even a modicum of security for civilians.

Against the backdrop of the Arab Spring, it is disappointing to see that the international community, and the U.S. in particular, has stepped in to support the people of Egypt and to protect the people of Libya, yet allows the Government of Sudan to continue its genocidal agenda without consequences. The people of Sudan deserve the same attention and action as their oppressed neighbors.

The violence in Sudan has been treated as a separate phenomenon from the Arab Spring, or, in harsh terms, a distraction from the more important events in the Middle East. However, the violence in Darfur, South Kordofan, and now Blue Nile is part of the government's military solution to the political and social issues of marginalization as articulated by the rebel movements, Sudanese civil society, and political parties. The international community needs to recognize that the violence in Sudan is not a nuisance that can easily be wished away; it is the predictable behavior of a nervous regime, anxious to hold onto power.

Holistic approach:

We are convened here in a discussion of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in South Kordofan and continuing human rights violations in Darfur. If our goal is long-term sustainability, in my view, we must place South Kordofan and Darfur in a broader context, inclusive of the deadly invasion of Abyei and the violence in Blue Nile state. Though inevitably more complex, a policy framework with a broader lens is fundamental to a more effective plan toward changing the behavior of the Khartoum regime. To change that behavior, the United States needs a sound new policy that will show Khartoum that violence against civilians, using food as a weapon, assisting proxy militias to terrorize communities, and granting total immunity to perpetrators will not be ignored.

Before South Sudan became the world's newest independent nation on July 9, the U.S. was forced to treat Khartoum with kid gloves. While this strategy helped usher in independence without obstruction, it had the unfortunate result of allowing the Government of Sudan to continue to attack and displace its people in North Sudan

and further delayed the international community's ability to address longstanding issues in Darfur and elsewhere. Now that we are dealing with a post-secession Sudan, the United States should take this opportunity to recognize the interconnected nature of the various conflicts and address their source.

Central to more assertive action by the international community is the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine, particularly given the scale and level of human rights abuses – many of which may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity – perpetrated by the Government of Sudan. In fact, the R2P doctrine was written specifically to address the situation that is occurring – and has been occurring for some time – in Sudan.

To begin addressing the source, rather than just the symptoms, of the problems in Sudan, we must address four primary issues: mediation; democracy promotion; accountability; and civilian protection. I have explained in greater detail in my full remarks for the Commission Record how the United States must approach each of these issues, and I welcome your questions, should you be interested in a description of how the U.S could be approaching mediation, democracy promotion, accountability, and civilian protection differently.

Conclusion:

As a nation with great stature in the world and one that is known for its diplomatic leadership, the United States must listen and respond to Sudanese calls for change in Sudan. Faithful to its historic role as peace broker, the United States must work to build an international voice with other concerned nations to support the Sudanese people. Your leadership, honorable Members of Congress, and your dedication to the plight of the Sudanese must extend toward supporting the forces for change toward democratic transition and security, fundamental objectives that the American and Sudanese people share.