

U.S. Diplomacy in Sudan: What's at Stake

Posted by [Laura Heaton and Maggie Fick](#) on Sep 09, 2009



The Obama administration will complete its Sudan policy review very soon and go public with its approach for addressing the multiple crises in Sudan, namely the rapidly deteriorating state of the North-South [Comprehensive Peace Agreement](#) and the unresolved conflict in [Darfur](#). The Obama administration's internal policy review, which began in March, has dragged on for months. The public face of the administration's position during this time has been the president's special envoy, Major General Scott Gration, who in public appearances and private meetings throughout his tenure, whether deliberately or inadvertently, has created the impression that the administration is softening its line with the ruling National Congress Party in [Khartoum](#).

Given the enormously high stakes in Sudan—a national election, largely funded by the U.S., slated for April next year that could dissolve into violence, and a referendum in 2011 that will give the South the chance to vote to become an independent country—it's critically important that the Obama administration strike the right tone in its policy and diplomatic strategy toward Sudan, at a time when the country could easily slide back into a hot war within the next 18 months.

Enough, along with the other organizations leading the ongoing [Sudan Now](#) campaign, sent an [open letter to President Obama](#) today that underlines the major problem that we see with the administration's emerging policy. The letter notes that "while an internal U.S. government agreement on tactical pressures and incentives has been reached, the broader diplomatic strategy through which these pressures and incentives will be enforced is fundamentally flawed." Enough and our partners in the Sudan Now campaign believe that alterations in the emerging U.S. approach to Sudan are necessary and urgent. We call on key members of the Cabinet – namely Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice – to intervene now to prevent the administration from signing, sealing, and delivering the problematic policies that the U.S. has begun to implement under Special Envoy Gration's direction.

Some trends we are seeing in Sudan lend support to the argument for a change in strategy from the Obama administration:

- The Khartoum regime has shifted its focus from Darfur to [southern Sudan](#), because it cannot sustain a two-front offensive at the same time in both places. When there is a lull in Darfur, as we are seeing now, there is an upsurge of violence in the South. The war is not "over" in either place.
- In the South, the threat of a return to full-scale war is gathering. Emerging evidence suggests that the Khartoum regime is arming ethnic-based militias and the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army to destabilize the region and call into question the southern government's ability to protect its people. Khartoum has frequently used proxy militias in both Darfur and the South to commit grave offenses against civilians.

- In Darfur, nearly 3 million people remain in camps, unable to go home because of violence from government-supported militias and the fact that their land remains occupied. The displaced and [refugee](#) populations face the constant threat of rape and other forms of violence by government-sponsored militias as well as disruptions in the delivery of lifesaving aid caused by the Khartoum regime and by rebel attacks on aid convoys.

And on the two hot-button issues, the Obama administration's approach so far is problematic:

NORTH-SOUTH: *The Obama administration should be creating a cost for failure to implement the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.* Instead of creating clear consequences for those who obstruct and undermine peace in Sudan, the administration is renegotiating the terms of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The United States must urgently work to forge an international coalition that constructs a set of genuine consequences for failing to implement what has already been negotiated. Any effort by the parties to arm militias is absolutely unacceptable. Consequences must apply to spoilers in either the North or the South and include tougher economic sanctions targeted at senior officials and affiliated businesses, increased diplomatic isolation, an expanded arms embargo, and increased support for the [International Criminal Court](#)'s work in Sudan.

DARFUR: *The Obama administration should be building and playing a lead role in a revitalized, internationally-backed peace process for Darfur.* The existing process has not generated a comprehensive proposal that addresses the root causes of the conflict and lacks popular support from Darfuri civil society. The United States must urgently lead a group of concerned nations—including Egypt and China—to offer sustained, high-level support and leverage to peace talks that focus on developing a draft peace proposal that addresses the core issues of the conflict and empowers the head mediator, backed by U.S. diplomatic support, to reach a political settlement. From day one of this renewed peace process, the United States must ensure that Darfuri civil society groups are directly engaged and that displaced camp residents are involved in all negotiations.

As Enough's co-founder John Prendergast aptly noted in the conclusion of the open letter, President Obama must realize that he is in precedent-setting mode now:

President Obama's handling of this crisis—one which he characterizes as genocide with respect to Darfur—is being watched around the globe, including the darkest corners where people without conscience may be planning the next genocide or mass atrocity. As South Sudan slides back toward war, and the stakes grow higher still, the world waits for President Obama's response.