

The Debating Chamber - Asking seriously about humanitarian access to Blue Nile and S.Kordofan
By Eric Reeves
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The northern Sudanese border states of Blue Nile and South Kordofan are on the verge of catastrophic human destruction.

This should not come as a surprise. For many months now warnings of famine, and diseases consequent upon malnutrition, have become increasingly urgent.

The devastating effects of bombing attacks during the planting season in the Nuba Mountains quickly became apparent last spring: following the June 5 outbreak of hostilities between Khartoum's Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the indigenous northern rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM/A-N), aerial assaults on villages, fields, and livestock became relentless.

A terrible reprise of these attacks on civilian livelihoods began in Blue Nile on September 1.

Some 150,000 people have already fled South Kordofan and Blue Nile for Ethiopia or South Sudan, which itself is facing potentially catastrophic food insecurity, deliberately exacerbated by many of Khartoum's actions.

Conditions in the camps in Upper Nile, where most of the refugees from Blue Nile have fled, are appalling and unsustainable. And the refugees themselves, who continue to flee in large numbers, are the best indicators of conditions for those who remain in the war zone, many too young or too feeble to make the exhausting trek southward.

IRC reports that some children show signs of "severe malnutrition"; Oxfam declares its sense that "we're on the path from crisis to catastrophe"; and Save the Children puts the issue most broadly: "A toxic combination of conflict, rising food and fuel prices, and severe cash shortages is having a devastating effect on the civilian population in both countries. With the rains on the way the situation could not be more critical."

Tom Catena, the only western physician working in the Nuba, wrote to me recently declaring: "The food shortages now are very severe. No one seems to have any food stock left and there's absolutely nothing to buy in the market. We have a small stock here that we're preserving for our staff and in-patients and are hoping to make it through the rainy season. Most people are eating leaves and these pod-like things from the trees." (email rec'd May 20, 2012).

Even more terrifyingly, people are widely reported to be eating their seed stocks, ensuring that there will be nothing for the current planting season -- or a harvest next fall.

But again, there is nothing surprising in what we are seeing. By October 2011, the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) had predicted that harvests would largely fail in Blue Nile and South Kordofan.

By November the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNet) was warning that near-famine conditions would be seen by March without humanitarian relief.

Currently, health workers are warning of "devastating epidemics" for lack of vaccines for children and other critical medical supplies. Reports from a wide range of humanitarian sources make unavoidably clear that many hundreds of thousands of lives are at acute risk.

And yet, in U.N Security Council Resolution 2046 (May 2, 2012) the council can bring itself to do no more than "strongly urge" that Khartoum allow humanitarian access.

Despite the Chapter 7 authority of the resolution, it ignores the regime's obduracy in the past, and its consistently demonstrated willingness to use the denial of humanitarian assistance as a weapon of war: in the Nuba Mountains in the 1990s, during the long civil war in the South, and currently in Darfur.

The Council resolution points to the access proposal made jointly by the African Union, the U.N., and the Arab League in early February---a proposal the SPLM/A-N quickly agreed to.

Predictably, Khartoum declares it is still "studying" the joint proposal; and almost four months later has succeeded in delaying any action until this year's heavy seasonal rains have begun.

This forces a question the international community has either skirted or denied any legitimacy: should humanitarian corridors be opened without Khartoum's consent if the only alternative is to watch hundreds of people slowly starve to death?

As the dying continues, the question will only become more exigent.