

**Now is not the time for more lip service
President Obama Needs to ACT NOW to Prevent Mass Starvation in the Nuba Mountains**

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For nine long months now, the Government of Sudan (GoS) has laid siege to the Nuba Mountains.irate at being challenged by the people of the Nuba Mountains over what the people perceived as a rigged election that eventuated in Ahmed Haroun becoming the Governor of South Kordofan and their aversion to the GoS' goal of Islamacizing the region, Sudanese President Omar al Bashir began an aerial and ground campaign last July. Yes, that is the same Ahmed Haroun who is wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes for atrocities perpetrated in Darfur. And, the very same Omar al Bashir who is also wanted by the ICC on charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes allegedly perpetrated in Darfur.

An untold number of Nuba Mountains people have been severely injured and killed as a result of the bombings by Antonov bombers and MIGs. Villages have been ransacked and burned to the ground, and hundreds of thousands of people have been run off their farms (which were basically their only means of sustenance).

Currently, an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 people are hiding in the rocky crevasses and caves of the nearby mountains. Without food or access to their farms, many are suffering from extreme malnutrition, and starvation has already set in and claimed the lives of people of all ages.

Human rights organizations, activists and various scholars have repeatedly called on both the United Nations and the United States to, at the very least, establish a humanitarian corridor in order to transport food and medical supplies to the hundreds of thousands in need. For at least three months, the Obama Administration has reported that such a possibility was under consideration, but talk has lorded it over action.

Since the very outset of the explosion of violence that has torn the Nuba Mountains asunder, numerous human rights activists have decried the bombings and killings. Many of my colleagues (most of whom are scholars of genocide studies) and I have written and published article after article in newspapers and magazines around the United States and abroad calling for international action, submitted petitions to the U.S. Congress and the White House, and written and/or endorsed Open Letters to Special Advisor on Genocide to the Secretary General Francis Deng and to President Obama, but to no avail. Time and again our efforts have either been met with utter silence or indirectly sloughed off with the assurance that the UN and the Obama Administration were doing all they could via diplomatic channels.

Well, all the talk and all the diplomatic efforts have come to naught. The bombings continue unabated, the dying and crying are facts of life, and hundreds of thousands are without food. So much for the international community's reported endorsement of the concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) (e.g., every nation is responsible to protect its own people and when a nation is either not capable of doing so or flagrantly fails to do so, then the international community has a responsibility to provide such protection).

In late April of this year, suggesting he was going a step beyond simply supporting R2P, President Obama announced his establishment of the Atrocities Prevention Board. In doing so, Obama asserted, “national sovereignty is never a license to slaughter your own people.” As cliché has it, talk is cheap. Without action, all the talk in the world about protecting innocent people from ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and genocide is worthless.

While talk may be cheap, the cost of simply throwing words at a problem such as the prevention of mass atrocities is horrendous: piles of dead bodies of innocent people resulting from a perpetrator’s actions and the international community’s feckless lack of care and attention to the suffering. Indeed, the Nuba Mountains people (infants, children, women and the elderly) are literally paying with their lives as the international community, and the White House, once again (as it did during the Holocaust, and the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda and Srebrenica) dither over whether to confront a tyrant who willingly, and with unbelievable impunity, kills his people at will.

Not only the cries of desperation by the victims are being ignored. On April 25, Franklin Graham, the noted evangelist and son of Billy Graham, called on President Obama to order the bombing of airstrips in Sudan in order to prevent GoS’ planes from carrying out sorties over South Kordofan. Graham said: “I certainly am not asking the president to kill anyone, just to break up some concrete to prevent the bombers from taking off. I think that by destroying those runways, we can force Mr. Bashir to the negotiating table.”

Graham’s plea was far from rash. In fact, it was only after visiting the Nuba Mountains and seeing the destruction and loss of life that resulted from the ongoing aerial attacks and incipient starvation that he felt compelled to call for such dire action. As he said, “The situation is desperate. I personally saw children starving to death last week while in Sudan’s Nuba Mountains. All they had to eat were insects, leaves from thorn bushes, roots and tree bark. It is only going to get worse.”

Whether Obama responded to Graham’s plea is not known; what is known is that Obama did not heed the plea. Personally, I did not think President Obama would countenance such an approach. Not only would it be extremely dangerous to pull off, but it would also constitute an act of war. That said, what Obama could do (and I believe should have done by now) is to get al Bashir to agree immediately to end the bombing of the Nuba Mountains’ peoples’ homes, villages, granaries and water sources (community pumps) and allow for the opening of a humanitarian corridor. And if al Bashir refuses, which is very likely, then President Obama should do everything in his power to prod, cajole and bully the international community into mobilizing around this center of death and do its utmost to save those who have not yet succumbed to violent deaths as a result of the bombings or the silent but horrifically miserable death due to starvation.

Obama and the rest of the international community are allowing the Government of Sudan to make a mockery of emerging international norms, and in doing so allowing him to provide ample evidence how R2P is just one more human rights concept contingent on realpolitik. Notoriously duplicitous (i.e., after agreeing not to offload any weapons in Darfur, the GoS painted its planes white, affixed UN insignia to the wings, and, then, under the guise of providing humanitarian aid, it delivered weapons to its soldiers and militia groups) and deceitful (the GoS has repeatedly signed one peace agreement after another in Darfur only to turn around violate them the very next day), this week the GoS announced it was finally ready to allow humanitarian aid into the Nuba Mountains. Any rejoicing that might have occurred was cut short when it became clear that the conditions set by the GoS were untenable.

First, the GoS stated that only Sudanese based groups would be allowed to provide aid, thus cutting out all international groups, and assuring that the government would control the entire situation, which very well could mean treating those in need with contempt and/or worse. Second, it stated that those who needed foodstuffs had to travel to Kadugli, a government stronghold, thus placing the needy in danger. Third, by controlling what the needy receive, the government may well fail to provide ample staples and/or exact a “fee” that is unreasonable or outrageous (such as forcing those who receive aid to first agree to leave Sudan altogether).

The international community and the Obama White House cannot allow the genocidal government of Sudan to continue its game playing as it always involves an inordinate cost to those in need. To allow al Bashir to set the agenda is simply another way to allow a genocidare and his genocidal government to snub its nose at the international community and its human rights covenants and to wave the impunity it enjoys in the face of one and all who recognize and abide by international agreements such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights and UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, and such emerging norms as R2 P.

If the Obama Administration is going to act then it needs to act now while lives can still be saved. Now is not the time for more lip service. Indeed, at this point in time, anyone who engages in lip service is nothing less than a bystander to what could well be a genocide in the making.

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Most recent columns

Samuel Totten, a genocide scholar at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, has conducted research in the Nuba Mountains. His latest book, Genocide by Attrition: The Nuba Mountains, Sudan is due out in 2012 (New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers).