

Genocide in the Nuba Mountains: A retrospective on what we knew, June 2011 – 2013

Eric Reeves

October 2013

Given the tepid international response to events throughout Sudan in recent weeks, we must wonder if what we have seen for two and a half years in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile is the face of Sudan's political future. Certainly the National Islamic Front/National Congress Party regime has shown no more restraint in violently putting down demonstrations than it has in trying to subdue the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM/A-N). Some will scoff at the suggestion, as they did when atrocity crimes were first reported from South Kordofan with chilling authority in June 2011. That same expedient skepticism is again on display in responding to current events throughout what is now Sudan. Silence about the deepening catastrophe in Darfur, where the last vestiges of security have disappeared, is of a piece with this response: there is no meaningful discussion of the millions of lives at acute risk if humanitarian operations collapse, which they may well do given the intolerable level of insecurity.

More than two years ago I began to publish regular accounts of the evidence that genocide was again beginning in the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan—and would soon spread to Blue Nile. Publications were in prominent venues, including two framing pieces that appeared in *The Washington Post* ([June 18, 2011](#) and [February 10, 2012](#)). To re-read them now, to contemplate the inaction, expediency, and disingenuousness of the international community that have followed—especially the U.S. and the UN—is simply soul-destroying. More than a million people have been displaced, hundreds of thousands brought to the brink of starvation while enduring a Khartoum-imposed humanitarian blockade, seen their livelihoods annihilated by relentless aerial attacks on agriculture—with no prospect of relief aid. Some 300,000 have fled to South Sudan and Ethiopia to refugee camps that offer poor conditions and are vulnerable in a wide variety of ways. Thousands have died.

Two years ago so much of this was visible, and yet it proved more convenient—politically and otherwise—not to press Khartoum to relent on its indiscriminate bombing of civilians and to end its humanitarian blockade of both the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile. The chief tool early on was simply a denial of the evidence, evidence that soon became incontrovertible but produced no change in the views or policies of those. This was accompanied by exorbitantly foolish assessments of Khartoum's intentions, precisely what we had seen prior to the military seizure of Abyei (May 21, 2011).

I have included below the titles, publication venue and date, links, and a brief excerpt from each of the dozen publications. There can be no response but shame to the many characterizations here that have been fully confirmed by evidence that continues to pour in from both Blue Nile and South Kordofan. I include in its entirety the first of the publications referred to here, "Genocide in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan," *Dissent Magazine* June 22, 2011:

• **"Genocide in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan"**

Dissent Magazine (on-line), June 22, 2011

<http://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/genocide-in-the-nuba-mountains-of-sudan>

by Eric Reeves

The Kauda valley in the very center of the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan, Sudan is a beautiful place, one of the most beautiful I've ever encountered. The hillsides are alive with tukuls (traditional thatched huts) and terraced landscapes that give the impression of always having been there—of belonging there. During my days there I took long walks into the remoter regions of the valley, taking many pictures and communicating awkwardly with folks I met. My camera seemed the perfect translation tool, as most of the people I photographed had never had the experience before, especially the children. And when they saw themselves—typically for the first time in their lives—in my flip-out monitor, the inevitable reaction (once recognition took place—not always an immediate process) was unconstrained laughter. I'm not sure I

understood the laughter, or that there was much to understand beyond the fact that seeing themselves was hugely entertaining and out of the ordinary....

I also attended a much grimmer gathering, in the rocky hillside well above Kauda: a meeting of Nuba military and civil society leaders, led by the deputy governor of the region (the governor was in Nairobi), in a large tent set up for this occasion (<http://www.sudanreeves.org/Sections-req-viewarticle-artid-129-allpages-1-theme-Printer.html>). They were determined that I should hear their story, and they were deadly serious. Again and again I felt the force of decades of anger and disappointment pushing me back in my seat. I learned firsthand how bitter the people of the Nuba were, having been left out of consideration at the time of independence (1956), and in the Addis Ababa peace agreement (1972) that ended Sudan's first civil war. They would not be left out of the next peace agreement, they insisted with a vehemence that was almost shocking, and clearly meant to be conveyed to those in whose hands their fate rested.

This was in January 2003—shortly after the cessation of hostilities agreement (October 2002), but well before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (January 2005) was signed by Khartoum and the southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). The Nuba knew that key decisions were going to be made about their future, and they wanted a voice. Most of all they wanted self-determination, even as they knew that the Nuba Mountains were not only in the North but nowhere contiguous with what will become the Republic of South Sudan on July 9. Their fear was that they would be left alone in a North Sudan dominated by Khartoum's ideological Islam and Arabism (the ethnically diverse African people of the Nuba follow a number of religions, including Islam). Their worst fears have been realized.

Historical memory in this part of Sudan is defined by the terrible experiences of the 1990s, when Khartoum mounted a full-scale genocidal assault on the people of the Nuba, killing and displacing hundreds of thousands. This was jihad, and it was based on a fatwa issued in Khartoum in January 1992. With this justification, a total humanitarian blockade was imposed on the region, and many starving people were driven into "peace camps," where receiving food was conditional upon conversion to Islam; those refusing were often tortured or mutilated. It is hardly surprising that Deputy Governor Ismael Khamis would tell me bluntly, "Khartoum doesn't regard us as human beings."

And judging by the nature of the genocide that is rapidly developing in South Kordofan, there can be little quarreling with Khamis' assessment. Clear patterns have emerged from the many scores of reports that have come to me from the region over the past two weeks, Human Rights Watch has confirmed that Khartoum's regular military and militia are undertaking a campaign of house-to-house roundups of Nuba in the capital city of Kadugli (<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/06/10/un-au-urge-end-sudanese-abuses-s-kordofan>). Many of these people are hauled away in cattle trucks or summarily executed; dead bodies reportedly litter the streets of Kadugli. The Nuba are also stopped at checkpoints grimly similar to those in Rwanda; those suspected of SPLM or "southern" political sympathies are arrested or shot. The real issue, however, is not political identity but Nuba ethnicity; one aid worker who recently escaped from South Kordofan reports militia forces patrolling further from Kadugli: "Those [Nuba] coming in are saying, 'Whenever they see you are a black person, they kill you'" (<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/06/16/v-print/115997/aid-workers-recount-ethnic-killings.html>). Another Nuba aid worker reports that an Arab militia leader made clear that their orders were simple: "to just clear."

Yet another Nuba resident of Kadugli ("Yusef") told Agence France-Presse that he had been informed by a member of the notorious Popular Defense Forces (PDF) that they had been provided with plenty of weapons and ammunition, and a standing order: "He said that they had clear instructions: just sweep away the rubbish. If you see a Nuba, just clean it up. He told me he saw two trucks of people with their hands tied and blindfolded, driving out to where diggers were making holes for graves on the edge of town." (<http://www.sudaneseonline.com/english/news/3516-sudan-eyewitness-recalls-south-kordofan-horror.html>). There have been repeated reports, so far unconfirmed, of mass graves in and around Kadugli. We should hardly be surprised that the charges of "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide" are coming ever more insistently from the Nuba people, observers on the ground and in the region, and church groups with strong ties to the region (http://www.episcopalchurch.org/81808_128691_ENG_HTML.htm).

Just as shocking is Khartoum's renewed blockade of humanitarian assistance to the people of the Nuba, hundreds of thousands of whom have already fled into the hills or mountainsides. The Kauda airstrip, critical for humanitarian transport, has been relentlessly bombed over the past ten days, and the UN now reports that it is no longer serviceable for fixed-wing aircraft. The airstrip has no military value, as the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) forces have no aircraft. The concerted bombing, with high explosives producing enormous craters, is simply to deny the Nuba food, medicine, and shelter.

The same assault on humanitarian efforts is underway in Kadugli and other towns under Khartoum's military control. The UN World Health Organization warehouse and offices in Kadugli have been completely looted, as have those of other UN humanitarian agencies (<http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/UN-Warehouses-In-Southern-Sudan-Looted-123840994.html>). The Kadugli airport has been commandeered by Khartoum's military forces, and all humanitarian flights into South Kordofan have been halted. The World Food Program has announced that it has no way to feed some 400,000 beneficiaries in South Kordofan (<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=38745&Cr=Sudan&Cr1>). As in Darfur, Khartoum intends to wage a genocide by attrition—defeating the Nuba by starving them.

What Khartoum seems not to have fully understood is how determined the Nuba SPLA are. These are not southerners, but true sons of the Nuba; they cannot "return to the South," because they are from the north. And they are well armed and well led by Abdel Aziz el-Hilu, a former governor of the region and fearsome military commander. They believe they are defending their homeland and their way of life. They have no alternative: as Khamis said to me during our 2003 meeting, "we have no way out." Given the geography of South Kordofan, there can be little quarreling with this assessment. These people will fight to the death.

Princeton Lyman, the U.S. special envoy, declared on June 16—eleven days after the killing began in Kadugli—that the United States "doesn't have enough information on the ground to call the campaign 'ethnic cleansing'" (<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/06/16/v-print/115997/aid-workers-recount-ethnic-killings.html>). This is an astonishing claim, given what the UN is saying in its confidential reports on the situation in Kadugli, what Human Rights Watch has reported, what is revealed by satellite photography, what escaping aid workers have told journalists, and what is revealed by photographs of the bombing of the airstrip at Kauda. Again, the airstrip has no military purpose: it is being attacked solely to deny humanitarian access to the Nuba people. And it is working: the World Council of Churches, an organization with close ties to the Nuba, reported on June 10 that as many as 300,000 people were besieged and cut off from humanitarian relief (<http://www.africafiles.org/article.asp?id=25398>).

Yet again the Obama administration is showing a painful lack of clear-eyed assessment and moral courage in addressing the genocidal ambitions of the Khartoum regime. This is the President's second "Rwanda moment," the second moment in which to decide whether or not halting genocide really matters to this administration. The first "moment" came early in the form of a decision about how to respond to undiminished human suffering and destruction in Darfur, about which Obama now barely speaks, despite his forceful campaign rhetoric: "The government of Sudan has pursued a policy of genocide in Darfur. Hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children have been killed in Darfur, and the killing continues to this very day" (April 2008). Obama's response was to appoint a special envoy to Sudan, General Scott Gration, who failed badly and conspicuously with his policy of accommodating Khartoum's génocidaires, men he thought would be impressed by his offer of "cookies, gold stars, and friendly faces." But as I've repeatedly argued in this forum, conditions on the ground in Darfur are if anything worse than when Obama issued his uncompromising words.

This brings us to the present, to this very moment, in which a decision must be made: acquiesce and settle for stern warnings to Khartoum, or act forcefully to compel a change in Khartoum's thinking. A militarily enforced No Fly Zone over South Kordofan—however desirable—is impracticable for a number of reasons: there is no easy or obvious solution to the problem of basing the necessary aircraft (including AWACS, tanker refueling aircraft, and patrolling combat aircraft); constant mid-flight refueling would present extraordinarily difficult and expensive challenges; and there appears to be no possibility of

securing either UN backing or even moral support from the Europeans for such a complex undertaking—let alone domestic support from a war-weary America. There is a much less costly but equally effective alternative, one that could be undertaken unilaterally if necessary: attacking Khartoum’s military aircraft on the ground, if those aircraft have been implicated in bombing civilians and humanitarians. The U.S. should then demand as a condition for halting these serial attacks an end to hostilities in South Kordofan, and an opening of humanitarian access. For despite Ambassador Lyman’s disingenuous claim about our not having enough information to assess the nature of the atrocity crimes in South Kordofan, there can be no reasonable doubt about the reality of widespread, systematic, ethnically targeted destruction of the Nuba people.

When I think back to my time at Kauda, and the beauty of the people and the hillsides—now much of it in flames, and all of it under the most intense assault—there hardly seems to be a choice. But diffidence, over-commitment, and apparent failure to understand what is at stake have made for what appears to be a disastrous decision by Obama in confronting his second “Rwanda moment.”

• **“In Sudan, Genocide Anew?”**

We are, once again, on the verge of genocidal counterinsurgency in Sudan. History must not be allowed to repeat itself. *The Washington Post*, June 18, 2011
http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/in-sudan-genocide-anew/2011/06/17/AGVhCVZH_story.html

by Eric Reeves

By early 2004, it was clear that the ideologically Arabist and Islamist regime in Khartoum was waging a genocidal counterinsurgency war throughout the western region of Darfur. Yet months passed before a broad range of human rights, government and academic voices said as much, even as the consequences of silence and inaction were conspicuous. In February 2004 I argued on this page that a “credible peace forum must be rapidly created. Immediate plans for humanitarian intervention should begin. The alternative is to allow tens of thousands of civilians to die in the weeks and months ahead in what will be continuing genocidal destruction.”

This prediction was borne out in the months that followed, the most destructive phase of the Darfur genocide, in which African tribal groups were mercilessly targeted by soldiers and militias. Sadly, mortality from war-related causes continues to mount. But now we are debating how many hundreds, not tens, of thousands have perished from war-related causes in Darfur.”

Today, another episode of genocidal counterinsurgency is beginning in another part of Sudan. Absent a vigorous international response, there will almost certainly be a reprise of ethnically targeted human destruction in the middle of the country, specifically within the Nuba Mountains region of South Kordofan....

• **“Passive in the face of Sudan’s atrocities,”** *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2012
http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/washingtons-passive-response-to-sudans-atrocities/2012/01/31/gIQA4qhW2Q_story.html

by Eric Reeves

Sudan is once again at war with itself — or, more accurately, the ruthless regime in Khartoum is again waging war on peoples at the marginalized peripheries as a means of crushing growing rebellion. The

primary target in this widespread conflict is not the [people of Darfur](#), although they continue to languish amid ghastly violence and deprivation. No, these latest targets are the African people of the border regions between northern Sudan and the new Republic of [South Sudan](#): the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. Last May, Khartoum's military seized [Abyei](#), a contested border region where Khartoum had refused to allow a promised referendum on self-determination in January 2011. The seizure displaced virtually the entire indigenous population of Dinka Ngok, more than 110,000 people, who fled to South Sudan, where they remain in poor conditions. Emboldened by the diffident international response to this assault, Khartoum moved in June against the rebels of South Kordofan and, more generally, the African Nuba people.

A bloodbath ensued in Kadugli, the state capital, and Nuba (who Khartoum claimed were "rebel sympathizers") were relentlessly targeted in house-to-house searches and roadblocks reminiscent of Rwanda. Fighting has now moved to the central Nuba Mountains, where all [humanitarian access has been denied](#) by the regime in Khartoum, which continues merciless [civilian bombings](#).

In September, the Sudanese government, still unchecked by international action, launched attacks on yet another region on the border, Blue Nile. Additional hundreds of thousands of civilians were displaced, many fleeing to neighboring Ethiopia or South Sudan. They're in desperate condition, as are refugees from South Kordofan.

For more than seven months Khartoum has denied all international relief to both Blue Nile and South Kordofan, bringing more than half a million people to the brink of starvation. Famine-like conditions are expected by March; children are already dying from malnutrition. Food supplies are exhausted in both regions, with little hope on the horizon: Spring planting and fall harvesting of staple crops were disrupted by aerial attacks. The U.N. [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) predicts that the harvests will largely "fail..."

[full text at: <http://www.sudanreeves.org/?p=4374>]