

The Danger of Enabling Elbashir

As the slaughter in Darfur is in its sixth year, conditions continue to deteriorate for civilians. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, even by the most conservative estimates. The United Nations officially puts the death toll at roughly 300,000, while Jan Pronk recently puts the number at no less than 400,000. Up to 2.5 million Darfuris have fled their homes and continue to live in camps throughout Darfur, or in refugee camps in Chad and the Central African Republic. Based on Sudan's behavior over the past five years—indeed since al-Bashir assumed power in 1989, it is clear that unless the international community imposes massive political costs for al-Bashir's intentional and calculated obstructionism, not to mention criminal behavior, his government will continue to buy time by accepting initiatives only to backtrack later or impose new conditions that render them useless.

Darfuris have been suffering, not only from an orchestrated campaign to eliminate them, but also from year after year of inaction by the international community. This week, Darfuris finally got a welcome bit of news: the prosecutor at the ICC charged al-Bashir with 10 counts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Let me be categorical about this: the people of Darfur wholeheartedly welcome and support this effort by Mr. Luis Moreno Ocampo!

Unfortunately, this good news is being drowned out by the many voices that insist — falsely, I might add—that justice and peace for Darfuris are incompatible and that they can only have one at the cost of the other. Unfortunately, whether they realize it or not, the intellectuals, academics, and practitioners who are advancing this claim that peace and justice are mutually exclusive are helping al-Bashir and his inner circle avoid the consequences of their crimes, and therefore are unnecessarily prolonging the suffering of innocent civilians. Let me be clear about this as well: the people of Darfur categorically reject this approach in principle! We reject it because it is inaccurate, we reject it because it is unjust, and we reject it because it flaunts centuries of traditional Darfuri conflict resolution mechanisms that have been intentionally sabotaged by Khartoum.

Let me ask you this: what does peace mean to me as a Darfuri woman who was forced to flee her home in the dark of night? What does peace mean to the many thousands of girls and women who were repeatedly raped in a calculated effort to destroy a community? What does peace mean to those that are dying a slow agonizing death in the camps while strangers have taken over their land? What does it mean to hundreds of thousands of orphaned children? What does it mean to the millions of elderly, women and children who rely on the WFP and others to not starve? Let me tell you that to those people there is NO peace WITHOUT justice. It is important to listen to the voices of the victims, and those who have argued that justice will derail a non-existent peace have not done so.

I, and millions of Darfuris and other advocates of peace AND justice, commend Mr. Ocampo for his courage and diligence. I appeal to all states and all UN organs to not undo his great work through their inaction. On behalf of those millions who have died,

suffered and continue to suffer as I speak to you today, I call on the ICC, the Security Council and all other relevant actors to not engage al-Bashir in the perverse calculus of justice OR peace. We want and deserve both justice AND peace. He has not taken meaningful steps toward either of those goals for nearly six years. It would be shortsighted to give him the benefit of the doubt now. Over the past few days, as many of you have surely seen and heard, al-Bashir has made some of the most conciliatory statements with regard to Darfur in the past six years. He is also calling on his allies in the African Union and the Arab League and China, not to help resolve the crisis, but rather to provide him with the political cover that he so desperately needs now. Al-Bashir has not had a change of heart, he is reacting to increased international pressure; now is the time to demand verifiable changes in Khartoum's behavior, changes that will further both goals of peace AND justice...actions that will have a concrete and measurable positive effect for the people of Darfur who have suffered for far too long already.

Nobody can ask the people of Darfur to relinquish their right to hold the perpetrators of mass atrocities accountable in exchange for vague promises of peace and security in Darfur. Our people have witnessed too many peace initiatives fail and too many delays in the deployment of peacekeepers who can protect the vulnerable. We understand the difficulty at hand in dealing with an authoritarian and genocidal government such as the one led by al-Bashir. However, there are no moral or legal grounds to strip the victims of their rights for political expediency.

Thank you...

Niemat Ahmadi