

What does it mean to talk of cooperation without justice and inclusion?

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By Anne Bartlett and Adeeb Yousif

October 8, 2012 - Looking at the multiple sites of conflict, misery and humanitarian disaster around Sudan, one might be forgiven for asking what it means to talk about peace and cooperation when there is barely any sign of justice and inclusion.

What is the point, for example, in labeling vast swathes of Sudan as “rebel territory”, its people as “belligerents” and the unelected minority in Khartoum as “the government” when this fiction does little to describe the actual reality on the ground? How effective are agreements that have been forced on the Government of South Sudan when they leave key issues either unaddressed or unresolved for large numbers of people? The answer seems pretty clear, yet in recent weeks, this is precisely the game of expedient diplomacy being played by the international community with, one might add, potentially disastrous results.

Even a cursory look at the recent set of agreements makes clear that that the majority of people who are suffering as a result of Sudanese government sponsored violence are not considered part of the equation. Not only are their problems ignored, but the NCP has been given a free hand to do whatever it wants to such people because their lives lie on the wrong side of national borders. This message is of course not wasted on the regime in Khartoum which is now pursuing campaigns against innocent civilians with renewed vigor. Take for example the escalating program of harassment, intimidation and killing over recent weeks in Darfur where more than 80 people were killed in the Hashaba area in Northern Darfur - 20 of whom were women and children. Elsewhere, IDP camps have been demolished around Kutum, dozens of people killed in bombing raids in the areas of Aradieb Al Ashara, Katur, Dubow and around east Jebel Marra and 16 people kidnapped by militia in Gurni, Jebel Marra in their way back from Kabkabia, Northern Darfur. Central Reserve Police known locally by Abu Terah flagrantly commit human rights abuses with absolute impunity. Recently Nigerian UNAMID personnel were also killed - by whom it is not clear - but local accounts suggest that government backed militias are taking advantage of the chaos to dirty the reputation of Darfuri people.

In the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile and elsewhere, political movements are being cut out of agreements between those in Khartoum and the GoSS, despite the fact that they control large sections of the border. Elsewhere, Abeyi remains a contentious and unresolved issue; the 14 mile zone is fast being turned into a “son of Abeyi” situation, and the problems that remain are left to fall back on the terms of the CPA which, as we know, has already been broken on multiple occasions. The Sudanese Media Center talks of the need to “sensitize the peoples of Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan on the steps needed to promote security and stability”. Quite what sort of “sensitization” they have in mind isn’t exactly clear, but if it is anything like the kind of “sensitization” they have employed elsewhere, it hardly inspires confidence. Add to this the fact that the agreements are full of gaping holes, invitations to discord, diplomatic speak and promises that will be next to impossible to implement, and one is left with a feeling of impending doom.

Meanwhile, all of these issues seem to be of little consequence to international powers who are busy using Sudan and South Sudan as a playground for their own geopolitical interests. Besides framing the situation in a way that suits their interests, they are now playing a game of diplomatic chess that has little to do with the interests of the Sudanese and South Sudanese people, and rather more to do with their own needs and aspirations. For example, in recent days Russia has stepped into the breach and now appears to be advising the GoS on the matter of Abeyi. Not content in committing gross abuses of human rights on its own southern borders, Russia now seems to think that it has something to add to the discussion of borders thousands of miles away in Sudan. Of course their unbridled altruism has little to do with the people of Abeyi and rather more to do with the glistening black stuff under the ground in the region. Elsewhere, China plays its own role: a kind of “keep your mouth shut” but carry on regardless role. In this role, China makes little public comment as long as it can continue with its agenda of ratcheting up trade and debt relations in equal measure. Finally the US has recently made its donations to South Sudan contingent on certain kinds of behaviors - most particularly democracy. Of course it is hard to dispute the value of democracy, but it is unclear how this can really be achieved while multiple competing geopolitical interests force the South Sudanese government to run in a variety of directions at the same time, rather than concentrating on a viable long term strategy for governance.

This obsession with geopolitics, diplomacy and getting “in on the ground in South Sudan” by international actors is simultaneously accompanied by a complete indifference to resolving the tensions and conflicts that have shaped both countries over recent decades. It is almost as if involvement in one sphere is accompanied by a belief that other groups are expendable and can be left to their fate. There appears to be a hollowing out of attempts to mediate grievances inside Sudan as a way of pandering to the regime in Khartoum and getting them to “do the deal” on the border situation. The idea seems to be that if legitimate grievances are ignored long enough, they will somehow go away. However as anyone familiar with the history of Sudan will point out, history isn’t exactly on the side of those who want to bury their head in the sand.

Taken together, these facts suggest anything but a rosy future for cooperation. The irony is that in their desire to pursue a piecemeal approach to conflict resolution, the international community will ultimately set the parameters for future violence.

The fact is that legitimate grievances do not go away; they only grow. Pretending that the Government of Sudan is a legitimate partner is foolish in the extreme; using South Sudan as playground for expedient diplomacy, geopolitical aspirations and greedy corporate interests will do nothing to help this young country get on its feet. Maybe the time has come for international actors to take a long hard look in the mirror. If they are honest, they may not like what they see.

Anne Bartlett and Adeeb Yousif are Directors of Darfur Reconciliation and Development Organization. Anne Bartlett may be reached at albartlett@usfca.edu; Adeeb Yousif may be reached at adeeb@drdoafrica.org