

"Put Up or Shut Up" on Sudan

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By Anne Bartlett

February 5, 2013 - If the last year has taught us anything about Sudan, it is that there is already so much hot air in Khartoum that the Sudanese government does not feel in the slightest bit concerned about some more from the international community. Endless discussions about Abyei, the 14 mile area, Darfur, Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan have singularly failed to protect innocent people or provide any hope for security. Sudanese government airplanes bomb large areas of Kordofan, Darfur and even inside the territory of South Sudan with apparent impunity. They cut off food supplies and humanitarian corridors in flagrant breach of international laws. They renege on deadlines, ignore reasonable requests, fail to pay their UN dues and play the international community like a violin. And well they might, because all evidence suggests that moral equivalency has become high fashion for diplomats and governments the world over, leaving no consequences whatsoever for the Government of Sudan's actions.

Princeton Lyman's miserable tenure as US Envoy to Sudan is now at an end, but the bigger question is whether the new incumbent will continue with the equivalent of diplomatic stonewalling, or have the courage to face up to the bullies in Khartoum. Chances are that unless Senator John Kerry and the State Department have a sudden change of heart, the former is most likely. In a meeting I attended in May 2012 in Arizona, it became clear that not only not only was the US prepared to play the game of moral equivalence, but they were willing to place unfair burdens on the Government of South Sudan and to blame the victims of the violence who they consider to be soft targets. Addressing the meeting, Lyman was clear that the SRF operating along the border needed to be reined in, but was rather less willing to confront the excesses of the government in Khartoum. The argument of course was that the SRF were defined as "rebels", but one has to question by whose judgment the NCP can actually be called a legitimate or functioning "government"?

If the US has failed to hold the Sudanese government to account, then so has the African Union. It is one thing to talk about agreements and deadlines, but quite another to take action when the Sudanese government fails to meet them. Of course, those in Khartoum know that the AU is more about "carrot" than "stick", so they play with negotiations and summits, knowing full well that nothing will happen to them. In response, AU negotiators are more comfortable in pushing the Government of South Sudan to make more and more concessions, rather than being the immovable object they should be, when Khartoum's representatives continually prevaricate and lie through their teeth.

This of course brings one to the question of what will happen if the failure to confront the Sudanese government actually continues. Diplomatically, many western governments are now extremely concerned about the prospect of uncertain, Islamist leaning governments across North Africa and hardcore Islamist elements galloping across the Sahel. There seems to be an idea that pandering to a Sudanese government that gave birth to some of these groups will provide some leverage. This is, however, a very dangerous game. Not only does it overplay the actual influence of Khartoum, which is today unraveling at the seams, but also assumes that the Sudanese Government is even concerned about what the West has to say. If one analyzes the last decade, then engagement with the fundamentalists in Khartoum has certainly not resulted in stability across the Sahel. Moreover, Sudan's parading of Islamic Jihad around the Presidential Palace in Khartoum in the last few days and their relations with Iran do little to indicate a de-escalation of their extremist credentials.

All of these diplomatic missteps are bought at the expense of legitimate chances for peace. Today people of the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile and Darfur are being bombed to within an inch of their life, while the international community looks the other way. The Government of South Sudan is forced to do all the running where "peace" is concerned, even if that running takes them up a dead end road. In the Jebel Marra, people sit in caves literally freezing due to lack of blankets and wonder why the world has forgotten about them. In Yida camp, those who have fled from butcher Haroun, now find themselves heading into the dry season with dangerous levels of malnutrition and insecurity. Hope for these populations is in short supply, but still the international community carries on with their agenda because it is much easier to disregard the rights of powerless people.

But just for the sake of argument, what could happen if the international community decided to follow a different diplomatic path? What would happen if instead of trying to encourage Sudan to negotiate, the international community got tough and took an oppositional stance? What if Sudan was subjected to punitive resource freezing measures and a promise (backed up with action) that further attacks on civilians would prompt an internationally enforced no fly zone? What if, in the case of South Sudan, international oil producing nations worked with the GoSS to discuss alternative oil futures? This could mean international investment in an oil pipeline not for cost effectiveness reasons, but rather as an investment in regional peace and stability. In Darfur, why not use the region as a buffer to stop the extremist elements in the Sahel, by locking the region down under existing UN mandates? This approach would prevent Sudanese government destabilization projects and would have a huge payback for international security. Why not start larger peace talks about how to resolve regional conflicts in

Sudan without involving countries like Qatar that have a wider Islamist agenda?

The point here is that there are choices to be made. The international community can bury its head in the sand and deal with each conflict incrementally, hoping that the problem will go away. But engaging the Sudanese government, while ignoring their predilection for violence, has two major problems. First, as we saw in the case of Osama bin Laden, it can come back to haunt you. Second, it will bring about the destabilization of large parts of Africa that will make the problems in Afghanistan look miniscule by comparison.

Working proactively with the African Union, the Government of South Sudan, the disenfranchised people of Darfur, Blue Nile and Kordofan will not only achieve a sustainable peace over the long term, but will, for a change, put the West on the right side of history. It will create long lasting partnerships based on respect and gratitude, rather than the cat and mouse game of that is currently being played with Islamists in Khartoum and elsewhere. It will speak to Bashir and his government in a language that they understand and are ready to listen to: force. Finally, it will cut the extremist producing cancer that is the Government of Sudan, out of North Africa once and for all. For these reasons, and for many others, the international community should now take a long hard look at their position and analyze where they are heading. In short, the time has come to "put up or shut up" on Sudan, before it is too late.

Dr. Anne Bartlett is a Professor and Director of the Graduate Program in International Studies at the University of San Francisco. She may be reached at: albartlett@usfca.edu