Acquiescence Before Mass Human Destruction in Sudan’s Border Regions

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For two months now the world has watched as the brutal regime in Khartoum continues to deny all relief access to large populations of acutely vulnerable civilians in Blue Nile State, which lies immediately north of the border dividing what are now North and South Sudan. The same embargo, extending even to independent humanitarian assessment missions, has been in place in neighboring South Kordofan State for five months. This scandalous fact bears repeating, since it has been so poorly reported: the National Islamic Front/National Congress Party regime in Khartoum has barred all international relief organizations from responding to what substantial evidence makes clear are major humanitarian crises in Blue Nile and South Kordofan—and both crises are on the verge of becoming overwhelming catastrophes, involving many hundreds of thousands of civilians.

There is an eerie familiarity to all this, for what we are seeing is an accelerated reprise of Khartoum’s strategy of obstructing relief efforts in Darfur, a strategy the regime committed to aggressively once it recognized its “error” in allowing an international humanitarian presence in Darfur. Regime officials now repeatedly make clear that they won’t allow “another Darfur” to emerge in either South Kordofan or Blue Nile—there won’t be any witnesses to the massive suffering and destruction that are well underway. And of course, in addition to banning all relief efforts, the regime allows no journalists or human rights monitors into either of these states.

We should remember that this regime has a decades-long history of obstructing humanitarian aid in Sudan, including the total embargo on relief efforts imposed by Khartoum on the Nuba Mountains throughout the 1990s—part of a jihad that is widely acknowledged to have been genocidal in ambition. Throughout the bloody civil war, which claimed well over 2 million lives in the South and border states—mainly from disease and malnutrition related to violence—Khartoum frequently cut off all humanitarian aid to the South for long periods of time. Because virtually all of Sudan was and remains inaccessible except by air—there are almost no roads, and in the long rainy season these are mainly impassible—airlift capacity and access are what’s critical. So all that Khartoum had to do to shut down humanitarian relief was deny air access to the large international humanitarian organizations based in Lokichokio, northern Kenya. In early July 2002, for example, the UN estimate for those being denied humanitarian assistance in the South was 1.7 million human beings.

So how has the U.S. responded to this most recent chapter in the regime’s deployment of its crude “weapon of mass destruction”? Officials of the Obama administration continue to go through the motions of demanding humanitarian access as well as an independent investigation of the well-documented, large-scale atrocity crimes in Kadugli, capital of South Kordofan; but it does so without either conviction or determination (the U.S. special envoy for Sudan, Princeton Lyman, first called for such a independent human rights investigation over two months ago, and can point to no progress whatsoever). There is very strong evidence that similar atrocity crimes are being committed in Blue Nile, certainly in the form of continuous, indiscriminate aerial attacks on civilians throughout much of the state (see my October 15 update to an analysis of such attacks over the past twelve years, at www.sudanbombing.org). And yet condemnation by the U.S. has been tepid at best.

Instead, the U.S., the UN, and other international actors of consequence have for months indulged in offering muted condemnations and making facile “demands” with no expectation of compliance. Since Khartoum’s military invasion of Abyei more than five months ago (May 20), the regime has not budged an inch from any of its categorical refusals. It will not withdraw militarily from Abyei, as it has promised; it will not engage in any discussions of access for humanitarians or human rights investigators; and it will not negotiate a political settlement to the conflict in South Kordofan, as it committed to doing in late June. The only change of note is that the propaganda organs of the regime have dramatically increased their activities and are now offering hideously distorting accounts of civilian life in the two states, and at the same time boasting that “regional and international changes [are] working in Sudan’s favour.”

As I argued in August, shortly before Khartoum’s military assault on Blue Nile, the international community and the UN in particular were setting themselves up for failure by demanding what would clearly not be granted, or even supported in the Security Council. The UN High Commission for Human Rights had declared very publicly that there should be in South Kordofan an “independent, thorough, and objective inquiry with the aim of holding perpetrators to account.” But it was obvious then and now that Khartoum would never accede to this demand; and it was equally clear that a Security Council resolution authorizing any form of non-consensual investigation—even for ethnically-targeted mass executions—would never survive China’s (or Russia’s) veto. The failure I spoke of is now conspicuous: despite the demand for an independent UN human rights investigation, no serious effort was ever made by the U.S. or any other member of the Security Council to seek authorization for such an investigation. And yet in characteristic fashion this failure has been passed over without remark or self-criticism. The evident thinking is that if the diplomatic mumbling continues long enough, then no definitive failure will be registered.

No matter that following Khartoum’s invasion of Abyei, a UN human rights team found strong evidence of actions “tantamount to ethnic cleansing” (the UN Secretariat would later disingenuously weaken this report); no matter that the military assault on South Kordofan began shortly thereafter, and we have received since June overwhelming evidence of widespread, ethnically-targeted civilian destruction, including extraordinarily revealing satellite photographs of mass gravesites; no matter that we have numerous eyewitness accounts of house-to-house searches and roadblocks targeting the African tribal grouping known as the Nuba. But there can be no doubt about the authority of a confidential UN human rights report, prepared by UN investigators who were on the ground for several weeks in June as part of the UN peacekeeping mission stationed in Kadugli. Their report was promptly leaked and its central conclusion made clear the urgency of a human rights investigation:

“Instead of distinguishing between civilians and combatants and accordingly directing their military operations only against military targets, the Sudan Armed Forces and allied paramilitary forces have targeted members and supporters of the SPLM/A, most of whom are Nubans and other dark skinned people.”

Arab militias have been widely reported to be doing much of the fighting for Khartoum, both in South Kordofan and Blue Nile. On October 22, SPLM-N Secretary General Yasir Arman asserted that Khartoum was in fact deploying mercenaries:

“The National Congress Party military has been, of late, actively engaged in recruiting Janjaweed militias—mostly non-Sudanese—from North and West Africa, particularly Niger. The airports of Al-Geneina and Nyala, Darfur, recently witnessed a flurry of flights transporting mercenaries to Damazin.” (Press Release, Office of the Secretary General of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North, October 22, 2011)

The large-scale use of mercenaries would mark a new stage in the Khartoum regime’s ruthless survivalism, and yet another crushing military expense for a budget and economy that are already in a shambles.

Obama administration skepticism

That an attack on South Kordofan was imminent was clear in the first days of June, primarily from evidence of a rapidly accelerating movement of men, arms and armor toward South Kordofan from the main forward military base at el-Obeid and other northern bases. Soon after the invasion, Satellite Sentinel Project photography revealed unambiguously that there were mass gravesites in and around Kadugli. The policy of the Obama administration in the face of such massive evidence, supported by numerous eyewitness accounts from the ground, was at once dismissive and skeptical; this peculiar skepticism extended even to a highly tendentious claim that the administration possessed (unspecified) intelligence that called into question the validity of the Satellite Sentinel Project findings. That skepticism, particularly on the part special envoy Lyman, has had the effect—presumably designed—of diminishing the urgency of the crises in the region. Lyman’s comments during an interview of June 28 (just as the UN human rights investigators were completing their powerfully damning report) suggest an almost casual concern for the unmistakable commission of atrocity crimes, and a specious moral equivalence as well:

“Because we don’t have a presence there [in South Kordofan], we haven’t been able to investigate [the many reports of atrocity crimes] fully. There are certainly reports of targeted killings. There are some reports from the other side also. What we’ve asked for is a full investigation.”

And to the follow-up question (“By whom [should the investigation be conducted]?”) Lyman responded baldly:

“Well, by the UN would be the best. The UN presence has not been sufficient to get out and stop this or to investigate it.”

Given this facile, finally disingenuous answer—Lyman certainly knew that no such UN investigation would be authorized—we must inevitably wonder about motives. Why these perfunctory answers to such pressing questions? What lay behind the contrived skepticism about findings from the Satellite Sentinel Project?

I have argued at length that there are strong indications, past and present, that U.S. policy toward Sudan is and has been unduly influenced by a lust for counter-terrorism intelligence from Khartoum’s ruthless security services, something reported in chillingly compelling fashion by the Los Angeles Times (June 17, 2005) and the Washington Post (August 30, 2010). The larger point here was made emphatically by former Senator Russ Feingold, who spoke with unrivalled authority, sitting on the Senate Intelligence Committee and chairing the Africa subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

“I take serious issue with the way the report [on international terrorism by the U.S. State Department] overstates the level of cooperation in our counterterrorism relationship with Sudan, a nation which the U.S. classifies as a state sponsor of terrorism. A more accurate assessment is important not only for effectively countering terrorism in the region, but as part of a review of our overall policy toward Sudan, including U.S. pressure to address the ongoing crisis in Darfur and maintain the fragile peace between the North and the South.” (Statement by Senator Russell Feingold, Chair of the Africa Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, May 1, 2009)

No other Senator joined former Senator Feingold in demanding that there be a response to this serious concern. As a consequence, the Obama administration has felt no serious Congressional pressure to acknowledge either the authority or significance of Feingold’s damning assertions.

But of course none of this matters to those who are already victims of a regime that sees the U.S. as obsessed with the prize of Khartoum-generated counter-terrorism intelligence. None of this matters to people who are uprooted, unprotected, and without humanitarian resources. Precisely because the regime allows no journalists, human rights monitors, or humanitarians into these highly threatened areas, we are left only with only broadly informed estimates, or evidence that is based on news accounts or accounts that come anecdotally from embedded or fleeing Sudanese civilians. But there are a number of credible estimates and a great deal of such reportage, some from intrepid journalists who have made it to the Kauda area of the Nuba Mountains and to Kurmuk, which is the southern Blue Nile stronghold of the northern indigenous rebel force (formerly allied with the rebel movement that secured Southern independence): the Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement-North (SPLA/M-N). There are even a few courageous humanitarians who have refused to withdraw from these regions, and have reported in excruciating detail on what they have seen.

Consequences of inaction

The possibility and immense danger of a military response by Khartoum in South Kordofan and Blue Nile had been conspicuous for quite some time before the assaults actually occurred, as had the invasion of Abyei. And yet no international actor of consequence spoke out in meaningful fashion; here the U.S. has plenty of company in failing miserably to anticipate the present violence, and the entirely predictable humanitarian crises that have come in its wake. Khartoum was not warned seriously against initiating the clearly impending assaults on South Kordofan (June 5) and Blue Nile (September 1); rather, the regime took its cue from the muted diplomacy of perfunctory exhortations and glib “expectations.” Following the brutal military seizure of the disputed Abyei region (May 20), the regime in Khartoum understood there was no serious commitment to halt their military endeavors. The Obama administration, as represented by special envoy Lyman, seemed clearly willing to let Khartoum have its way in the North, so long as some terms of the CPA continue to be observed as South Sudan struggled into nationhood.

Just as a senior administration official declared that genocide in Darfur had been “de-coupled” from the key issue in bilateral relations between Khartoum and Washington (i.e., Khartoum’s continuing presence on the U.S. State Department list of terrorism-sponsoring nations), so atrocity crimes and even extermination in northern states, on whatever scale, are apparently insufficient to compel any robust U.S. response or change in policy. Given such decisions, to pretend that we don’t really know what is going on, as Lyman has repeatedly tried to do, is a nasty bit of political expediency.

Dispatches with datelines in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile have come from a wide range of news organizations. UN investigators, part of the UN peacekeeping mission (UNMIS) with a base in Kadugli, produced their searing human rights report in late June/early July, and it included the following:

“Instead of distinguishing between civilians and combatants and accordingly directing their military operations only against military targets, the Sudan Armed Forces and allied paramilitary forces have targeted members and supporters of the SPLM/A, most of whom are Nubans and other dark skinned people.”

“[This campaign included] aerial bombardments resulting in destruction of property, forced displacement, significant loss of civilian lives, including of women, children and the elderly; abductions; house-to-house searches; arbitrary arrests and detentions; targeted killings; summary executions; reports of mass graves; systematic destruction of dwellings and attacks on churches.”

“With the reinforcement of Sudan Armed Forces, Central Reserve Police and militia elements, the security situation deteriorated on 7 June, with indiscriminate shelling of Kadugli town apparently targeting densely civilian-inhabited areas.”

“On 22 June, an UNMIS independent contractor reported witnessing SAF elements fill a mass grave in Al Gardut Locality in Tillo with dead bodies. She reported that SAF elements transported the bodies to the site, dumped them in the grave and using a bulldozer to cover the grave. On 10 June, UNMIS Human Rights interviewed residents from Murta village, outside of Kadugli Town, who stated that they saw fresh mass graves located in a valley southeast of the Murta bus station near the Kadugli police training centre.”

And UNMIS was not the only source for reports of egregious violations of human rights. Many Nuba have reported bombing attacks on civilians since June 5, as well mass slaughter and assaults on humanitarian operations and workers. Julie Flint in The Observer (UK) (July 17, 2011) draws on many years of experience and unimpeachable sources in reporting that:

“National staff of international aid organisations have also come under attack. UNMIS cites the case of a young Nuba woman arrested and accused of supporting the SPLM. UNMIS human rights officers saw bruises and scars on her body consistent with her claim to have been beaten with fists, sticks, rubber hoses and electric wires.”

“Underscoring the need for the ‘independent and comprehensive investigation’ UNMIS recommends, the Observer has been told—by a hitherto impeccable source not connected to the SPLM/A—that 410 captured SPLM sympathisers were ordered executed on 10 June by Major-General Ahmad Khamis, one of four senior army officers sent to South Kordofan from Khartoum at the start of the war …. ”

These are the reports, along with unambiguous satellite imagery from the Satellite Sentinel Project, about which Lyman has continued to express skepticism. Also ignored were dispatches from a number of journalists who made it to Kauda in July, in the center of the Nuba Mountains. There they reported—often with accompanying photography—on the horrific human toll taken by relentless aerial attacks on civilian targets. At a crucial time in the agricultural cycle, when the planting and tending of crops was critical, there was instead massive displacement. The people of the Nuba are facing starvation in the near term.

And from Blue Nile we also have many dispatches with a Kurmuk dateline (the town actually straddles the Sudan/Ethiopia border), reporting again on relentless aerial attacks directed against civilian targets (again, see my October 15 update to the history of this long-term military practice, at www.sudanbombing.org ). Within days of the September 1 assault, the African Center for Justice and Peace Studies (UK), with excellent sources throughout Sudan, was reporting that, “On 3 September, aircraft continued to bomb SPLM areas. The main water reservoir in Al Damazein was destroyed in the bombardment, possibly in a deliberate attempt to deprive the population of this essential resource. About 75 bodies have been confirmed to be present in the Al Damazein morgue. The hospital has declared an emergency.”

The UN’s Integrated Regional Information Networks (October 17, dateline: Kurmuk) makes clear the relationship between the lack of food and aerial bombardment by Antonovs:

“Khidir Abusita, the chief of Maiyas village, in Sudan’s crisis-hit Blue Nile state, points to a bomb and the shrapnel that ripped through two ‘tukuls’ (conical mud and thatch huts) on 2 October. That day, the Sudan Armed Forces’ Antonov bomber planes literally broke apart two families and left the village terrorized by their almost daily appearance. Abusita spoke to IRIN about the damage caused to his village: ‘The Antonov came here at around midday [on 2 October]; it bombed the place, killing six people, including one child. Among the people who died were two pregnant women.’”

“In one of the affected families, three people died and three are remaining, so we took these three behind the mountain to hide. In this other family, two died and three are remaining. ‘Another man who was just passing by to visit his neighbours was killed too. They were just farmers. His leg was cut and we tried to take him to hospital but he died.’ ‘The other injured man is lying at Kurmuk hospital after the [bomb] cut his feet and stomach.’ ‘Yesterday [1 October] there were two Antonovs around the area. They just circled overhead for one hour, so we are very scared.’ ‘Most of the people have stayed here, but behind the mountains. We sleep near the river during the day and come back to the village at night.’ ‘We just eat from these small, small farms; we just [grow food] near our houses because this year we haven’t been able to go to our farms in the valley to cultivate.’” (emphasis added)

“We don’t have sugar, we don’t have tea, we don’t have coffee. Also there is no medicine, people are just depending on the traditional medicine. ‘There are 3,475 people in the village and no one has enough food. We don’t know what to do,’ [said chief Abusita].”

Towards the end of September the UN declared that it was urgent to get food to the people of Blue Nile and South Kordofan, even as estimates of numbers of displaced persons and food needs was already inadequate to the realities of human need now apparent. Malik Agar, the elected governor of Blue Nile—and deposed by Khartoum—has estimated that half Blue Nile’s population of 1.2 million is “on the move.” And they are on the move at a time that should be given over entirely to harvesting crops planted during the past rainy season. There is no way to verify Malik’s estimate, but it would be foolish to ignore the clear indications that hundreds of thousands of people are now displaced. More than 30,000 have already fled to Ethiopia; many others to neighboring Sennar State. As in South Kordofan, the very rough humanitarian assessments of food availability suggest that massive human starvation may be imminent if access is not granted by the regime. Valerie Amos, the head of UN humanitarian operations—and who in mid-July early declared that “we do not know whether these is any truth to the grave allegations of human rights abuses” in South Kordofan—found herself obliged to declare (August 30) that:

“[M]ore than 200,000 people affected by the fighting in South Kordofan faced ‘potentially catastrophic levels of malnutrition and mortality’ because of Khartoum denying access to aid agencies. Also this week, two leading human rights groups said that deadly air raids on civilians in rebel-held areas of the Nuba Mountains may amount to war crimes.”

More recently the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) put the matter more bluntly, if still almost certainly understating, significantly, the scale of human need:

“The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation has also launched a $3.5-million appeal to help 235,000 people on the brink of starvation in Sudan’s embattled southern border region, because of fighting in Blue Nile and South Kordofan.” (emphasis added)

The FAO has also indicated in its October 5 news release that the forecast for food security is exceedingly grim, and that “next month’s harvest is expected to generally fail.” (emphasis added)

“Next month’s harvest is expected to generally fail … ” —and there is no international humanitarian presence or access.

What will it take to stop the continuing slide toward catastrophe in South Kordofan and Blue Nile? And what about Darfur, which is no longer mentioned by the U.S. and the Europeans except parenthetically? To make matters worse, both the UN and the African Union are, for different reasons, committed to a representation of Darfur that minimizes ongoing suffering and destruction, and highlights an essentially meaningless (and potentially counter-productive) agreement that finally emerged in July from the bumbling and increasingly politicized Doha (Qatar) peace talks.

Certainly much was revealed about the future of marginalized regions in northern Sudan with the breakdown of the important framework agreement signed on June 28 by Malik Agar, representing the Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement-North, and by presidential advisor Nafi’e Ali Nafi’e of the National Islamic Front/National Congress Party regime. The agreement committed the signatories to seek a political resolution of the conflict and to begin immediate negotiations for a cease-fire. But the agreement was promptly disowned by President al-Bashir on his return from China (July 1, 2011). More than disowning the agreement, al-Bashir declared at Friday prayers:

“‘[Al-Bashir] directed the armed forces to continue their military operations in South Kordofan until a cleansing of the region is over,’ SUNA quoted Bashir as telling worshippers during Friday prayers.” (emphasis added)

In al-Bashir’s abrupt reneging we saw for the first time the full power of the generals who now dominate the political and security cabal that rules in Khartoum. These military figures, several of them senior cabinet officials, have slowly moved Sudan into what one well-informed source in Khartoum calls the “hour of the soldiers.” In short, there has been a “creeping military coup,” and some of the generals who are now so powerful appear on a range of lists assembled by UN and other bodies for the prosecution of atrocity crimes by the International Criminal Court (Abdel Rahmin Mohamed Hussein, the current Defense Minister and former Minister of the Interior, is one of 17 named on a confidential annex to a report by the former UN Panel of Experts on Darfur; February 2006). They know their future depends on surviving at all costs, or they will spend the rest of their lives in The Hague.

But there is no apparent recognition of this new political reality in Khartoum by the Obama administration, and special envoy Lyman simply repeats his glib assessment: “there is no military solution to the conflict,” and all the U.S. can do is “promote negotiations.” But it is precisely a military solution to its “new southern problem” that Khartoum is seeking, as al-Bashir’s comments make perfectly clear. And as for negotiations, the regime is equally blunt: “Sudan will never again negotiate ‘under UN supervision’”:

“‘There will be no negotiation with the SPLM-N because it was the one that started the war’ [President al-Bashir] said, adding that ending the state of war in the two states is contingent on the SPLM-N’s acceptance of the elections results in South Kordofan and surrendering its arms to the Sudanese army. ‘There are no more negotiations or protocols, this is our position,’ Al-Bashir declared.” (“Bashir takes pride in Sudan’s defiance of UN resolutions,” Sudan Tribune, October 13, 2011)

Lyman has made no comment on such intransigence by one of the “negotiating” partners he would have us believe can be accommodated diplomatically. And he no longer pushes for the independent, UN-led human rights investigation he thought worth proposing in June; now there is a hideously belated focus on humanitarian access, as the desperate plight of many hundreds of thousands of civilians no longer permits any skepticism:

“United Special envoy to Sudan Princeton Lyman urged Khartoum to allow ‘credible’ international organizations to reach the border states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile in order to assess the humanitarian situation.”

But this plea will be met with the same aggressiveness and truculent defiance that has increasingly become the hallmark of the Khartoum regime. And having pleaded so feebly previously, there is precious little reason to believe that Lyman’s voice will carry any weight now.

It is happening, before our very eyes, if we would only see. Yes, of course there is much that we don’t know; but there is too much that we do know for any further delay to be justified: even exceedingly conservative UN estimates for displacement and humanitarian need are more than enough. And do we have any doubt about the authenticity of these narratives from Kurmuk? or the significance of deliberate, continuous aerial attacks on civilians and agricultural livelihoods?

“In another hospital bed, 65-year-old Altom Osman is recovering from a deep shrapnel wound in his back and one in his arm after a bomb hit the village of Sali an hour north of Kurmuk. ‘I was taking some sorghum flour to my wife. We were passing our farm and then the Antonov came immediately and bombed,’ Osman whispered. Two hours further north, in Maiyas, village chief Khidir Abusita points to a hole a bomb from an Antonov made that he said killed six people, including 55-year-old Hakuma Yousif and her 20-year-old daughter Soura in their hut. ‘Yesterday there were two Antonovs and they were circling for an hour. We are very scared…’” (Agence France-Presse [dateline: Kurmuk], October 17, 2011)

“[Following Southern] independence in July this year, Maza Soya led her nine children out of a squalid camp in Ethiopia dreaming of a new life back home in Sudan. Last month, however, fighting erupted in Blue Nile state between the northern Sudanese army and fighters allied to the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), the dominant force in the newly independent South Sudan. ‘Our homes were burnt down to the ground. There were daily air raids on our town,’ Soya told Reuters two weeks after fleeing back to Ethiopia’s frontier town of Kurmuk.” (Reuters [dateline: Kurmuk], October 14, 2011)

“Satdam Anima’s eyes flicker and weep as the doctor sews up the stump of his left arm, before he rolls back on the hospital bed, one of the latest victims in Sudan’s relentless bombing campaign in Blue Nile state. Dr Evan Atar says he has done seven amputations since war broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and fighters loyal to the SPLM-North in Blue Nile state last month. He has treated more than 600 others for shrapnel wounds. ‘We are really now running out of supplies. We have been running here and there and crying… But now where to get it from is really an issue,’ he said.”

“President Omar al-Bashir has blocked foreign aid agencies from entering Blue Nile and nearby South Kordofan state, where a separate conflict between the army and SPLM-North rebels has raged since June. Kurmuk’s is the only hospital between neighbouring Ethiopia and Damazin, the state capital of Blue Nile, which remains under SAF control, and Dr Atar is the only doctor. He says the hospital will run out of vital supplies such as saline solution, cotton and gauze this week if no aid arrives, after using up six months’ supplies in one.”

“A man on the operating table cries out in pain, but Atar says the hospital has no more anaesthetics to give him. Cotton, gauze and saline solution will run out this week if aid does not arrive, he says, adding that six months of supplies have been used up in the past six weeks. ‘We are running short of everything—drugs, dressings.’ He feared the hospital would have to buy salt, boil it, and use it to sterilize wounds. ‘The problem is that there is no way we can get the drugs in here now because of the Antonovs bombing the area, making it very dangerous to fly supplies in from Kenya.’ Sudan’s President Omar al-Bashir will not allow foreign aid agencies inside Blue Nile or the neighbouring state of South Kordofan, where the government has been fighting SPLM-N forces for months.” (Agence France-Presse [dateline: Kurmuk], October 10, 2011)

“Atar is the only doctor in Kurmuk, which has the only hospital between state capital Damazin, and neighbouring Ethiopia. Nurse Walid Solomon says 20-year-old soldier Satdam Anima is the seventh amputee victim the hospital has dealt with. He was hit by ‘the big bullet of the Antonov.’ Atar, with Solomon’s assistance, sews up the stump near the left shoulder, and Satdam’s eyes roll in pain. The lack of blood donors mean that the hospital’s 24 nurses donate blood to keep patients alive. The aerial bombardment in and around Kurmuk is evident and audible. ‘In the first war, there was peace in the villages; now they [Antonovs] bomb even the villages—that’s the problem; and the increasing accuracy of the bombing is leading to rising patient numbers as the weeks go by,’ Atar said.” (UN IRIN [dateline: Kurmuk], October 12, 2011)

“At the beginning of October, locals say a bomb killed half a dozen people in Maiyes, a village near Ethiopia’s border. Holding a piece of twisted iron shrapnel next to the churned earth around the crater, neighbour Mahmoud Abdanafi Jundi says the village buried the victims’ bodies in one grave. ‘When the bomb hit, the people in the house over there, three of them were killed. The people who were living here also died. A child over there was also killed,’ he said, gesturing to thatched huts that now lie empty.” (Reuters [dateline: Kurmuk], October 13, 2011)

“They fled their village of Sally after a bombing raid. But even in this temporary camp she has not found safety. ‘I don’t know why the Antonov came and bombed us, but we left our village and came here,’ she said. ‘And after we came here, we found that the Antonov is coming also to this place.’ Earlier that day, she narrowly escaped being hit by shrapnel from a bomb dropped in a river bed where villagers were searching for scraps of gold to sell for food. When the bombs hit their target, the results are deadly. A crater in the ground was all that was left of one family’s hut in Maiyes village, about 20 kilometres from the front line. Household possessions, including a child’s shoe, were scattered around. Relatives and neighbours held up twisted pieces of shrapnel, which they said had ripped apart the family of six.”

“‘One of them was pregnant and it cut her stomach,’ said Heder Abusita, the village chief. ‘Rueana Murdis also was killed here with her small kid. And also there is Bushara. He died here in this house. His feet were cut, and his stomach also was cut.’” (The National [AE] [dateline: Kurmuk], October 19, 2011)

“Huwa Gundi, 21, sits on a sheet outside two makeshift tents near her home village of Sali, where her extended family of eight now live off one meal a day. Cradling her four-month-old baby, Fatma, she says her three other children have died since the start of the conflict in Sudan’s Blue Nile State in early September. ‘They were sick, and they died; there was no medicine,’ Gundi said, adding that Fatma now has diarrhoea and a fever at night. ‘We heard the voice of the Antonov [plane used by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) for dropping bombs]. We know it well,’ she said, referring to the bombing of her village, Sali, which she and her family were forced to abandon. ‘We don’t have anything to eat; we just go into the bush and then in the old farms we find some “dura” [sorghum] that is growing and we just make porridge,’ she said.” (UN IRIN [dateline: Kurmuk], October 13, 2011)

Either the world very soon finds the political will to make clear to Khartoum that there will be intolerable consequences if they proceed with their policies of extermination, or history will record that the U.S and a great many others were willing to accommodate what it knew to be mass human destruction, defined by widespread and systematic atrocity crimes, and do nothing but weakly exhort those responsible to behave better. It will be one of the ugliest chapters in the grim history of the past century.