

From Peace Prize to Paralysis

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IN THE NUBA MOUNTAINS, Sudan

WHEN a government devours its own people, as in Syria or Sudan, there are never easy solutions. That helps explain President Obama's dithering, for there are more problems in international relations than solutions, and well-meaning interventions can make a crisis worse.

Yet the president is taking prudence to the point of paralysis. I'm generally an admirer of Obama's foreign policy, but his policies toward both Syria and Sudan increasingly seem lame, ineffective and contrary to American interests and values. Obama has shown himself comfortable projecting power — as in his tripling of American troops in Afghanistan. Yet now we have the spectacle of a Nobel Peace Prize winner in effect helping to protect two of the most odious regimes in the world.

Maybe that's a bit harsh. But days of seeing people bombed and starved here in the Nuba Mountains have left me not only embarrassed by my government's passivity but outraged by it.

The regime of President Omar Hassan al-Bashir is dropping anti-personnel bombs full of ball bearings on farming villages. For one year now, Bashir has sealed off this area in an effort to crush the rebel force, blocking food shipments and emergency aid, so that hundreds of thousands of ordinary Nubans are now living on tree leaves, roots and insects.

What should I tell Amal Tia, who recently lost a daughter, Kushe, to starvation and now fears that she and her four remaining children will starve to death, too? "We'll just die at home if no food comes," she told me bleakly.

Perhaps I should tell her that Nuba is an inconvenient tragedy, and that the White House is too concerned with Sudan's stability to speak up forcefully? Or that Sudan is too geopolitically insignificant for her children's starvation to matter?

Nothing moved me more than watching a 6-year-old girl, Israh Jibrael, tenderly feed her starving 2-year-old sister, Nada, leaves from a branch. Israh looked hungrily at the leaves herself, and occasionally she took a few. But, mostly, she put them into her weak sister's mouth. Both children were barefoot, clad in rags, and had hair that was turning brown from malnutrition.

Their mother, Amal Kua, told me that the family hasn't had regular food since the Sudanese Army attacked their town five months ago. Since then, she said, the family has lived in caves and subsisted on leaves.

Yet the Obama administration's special envoy for Sudan and South Sudan, Princeton Lyman, generally a smart and hard-working diplomat, said in a December newspaper interview: "We do not want to see the ouster of the regime, nor regime change." Huh? This is a regime whose leader has been charged with genocide, has destabilized the region, has sponsored brutal proxy warlords like Joseph Kony, has presided over the deaths of more than 2.5 million people in southern Sudan, in Darfur and in the Nuba Mountains — and the Obama administration doesn't want him overthrown?

In addition, the administration has consistently tried to restrain the rebel force here, led by Abdel Aziz Al-Hilu, a successful commander who has lived in America and projects moderation. The rebels are itching to seize the South Kordofan state capital, Kadugli, but say that Washington is discouraging them. In an interview in his mountain hide-out, Abdel Aziz noted that his forces have repeatedly been victorious over Sudan's recently.

"Their army is very weak," he said. "They have no motivation to fight." He seemed mystified that American officials try to shield a genocidal government whose army is, he thinks, crumbling.

Likewise, in Syria, the United States has not only refused to arm the opposition but has, I believe, discouraged other countries from doing so. Yes, there's an underlying logic: the Syrian opposition includes extreme elements, and the violence is embedded in a regional sectarian conflict. Nonetheless, the failure to arm the opposition allows the conflict to drag on and the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, to massacre more people. The upshot is that the violence spills over into Lebanon, and sectarian poisons make Syria less and less governable.

In both Syria and Sudan, the Obama administration seems stuck behind the curve.

So what could be done? In Syria, we should make clear that unless the security forces depose Assad in the next 30 days, our Middle Eastern allies will arm the Syrian opposition. We should work with these allies, as well as with major powers like Russia and China, to encourage a coup, or a "retirement" for Assad.

In Sudan, we should disable the military runways that bombers take off from to attack civilians in the Nuba Mountains, or destroy an Antonov bomber and make clear that we'll do the same to others if Sudan continues to bomb its people. Then we should support efforts by private aid groups to bring food and seed into the Nuba Mountains, by airdrops in this rainy season when roads are impassible.

The United States and other powers are helping to pay for the Yida refugee camp in South Sudan. But without the bombings, the Nubans would be able to farm and feed themselves and wouldn't need a refugee camp.

As Andrew Natsios, a former special United States envoy to Sudan, has argued in *The Washington Post*, we should also provide South Sudan with a modest antiaircraft capability. That would prevent Sudan from escalating its air war on South Sudan.

These measures may or may not work. Stopping a government from killing its own is an uncertain business. But our existing policies in Syria and Sudan alike are failing to stop the bloodshed, and they also are putting us on the wrong side of history.

Obama was forceful in demanding that President George W. Bush stand up to Sudan during the slaughter in Darfur, so it's painful to see him so passive on Sudan today. When governments turn to mass murder, we may have no easy solutions, but we should at least be crystal clear about which side we're on. That's not too much to expect of a Nobel Peace Prize winner.

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