**Genocide in Darfur: How Sudan covers it up**

**Genocide in Darfur may be a debated legal question, but there's no denying that Sudan is working to cover up its crimes against human rights there.**

By John Prendergast and Omer Ismail

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Washington; and Doha, Qatar – Most governments don't acknowledge it. The Sudanese president dismisses it. Darfurians demand that it be recognized. Academics, activists, and lawyers dispute whether it is still occurring or whether it occurred at all. International Criminal Court (ICC) judges debate standards of evidence surrounding it. The nature of recent attacks this past week by Sudanese government forces and militia allies against defenseless civilians potentially augurs its resurgence. And if a fledgling peace process continues to move forward, then any evidence of it ever happening may well be swept under the rug.

The "it" in question is Darfur's genocide. Seven years after a small rebellion in western Sudan by Darfurian insurgents unleashed a massive counter-insurgency strategy by the Sudanese government and its Janjaweed militia allies, the debate continues: What should be done about the genocide? How can justice and peace simultaneously be pursued?

The ICC's recent ruling that genocide charges against Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir are possible gives new life to the issue. And responding to a YouTube question posed by the Enough Project, President Obama appeared to reverse his administration's stated policy of an "ongoing genocide" by referring to it in the past tense. How do we make sense out of all this?

In our eight trips into Darfur over these past seven years, we have never met a Darfurian who does not believe genocide has occurred. But genocide is ultimately the subject of international law. The Genocide Convention states that the crime pertains when a party intends to destroy – in whole or in part – a particular group of people based on their identity. Although judges will ultimately rule on this, we believe the evidence for genocidal intent is there.

Eyewitness reports this past week of aerial bombardment of villages followed by attacks on civilians populations by armed horsemen echo back to a period just a few years ago when much of Darfur was literally on fire. These reports are emerging simultaneous to a series of framework ceasefire agreements, thus complicating the Darfur landscape further. What we do know, though, is that these recent attacks and their aftermath reinforce a disturbing trend: evidence of the human rights crimes that have been and are being committed is being concealed and compromised.

The ruling party in Sudan responsible for the bulk of the crimes in Darfur is covering up the evidence for previous and ongoing human rights crimes in five unique ways. The international community must act now – in the context of peacemaking efforts – to blow the lid off this elaborate and deadly cover-up.

First, most of the aid agencies that were thrown out last year by President Bashir were working quietly to support survivors of sexual violence and to protect thousands of women and girls from rape. One of the principal tools of war in Darfur has been systematic rape, a factor in any argument supporting the existence of genocidal intent. By removing most of the groups that were protecting or caring for rape survivors, the cover up is on.

Second, the Khartoum regime has systematically denied access to the United Nations/African Union observer mission to investigate attacks on civilians, so many of these attacks go unreported and the culpability remains mysterious. The observer mission has had no access to the areas of recent government attacks, and thus the UN mission has been totally silent in the face of major attacks.Â What is the role of this hugely expensive mission if not to observe and report? Â Denial of access is part of the Khartoum regime's ongoing cover-up of new crimes, so the false argument can be strengthened that rights violations in Darfur are a thing of the past.

Third, there continue to be humanitarian black spots, areas where aid agencies simply can't go, such as the areas affect by this week's fighting, leaving over a third of Darfur unreached by food and medical aid. We don't know the scale or scope of this problem, but we do know that when access is denied or when aid agencies are expelled, people are much more at risk of disease or malnutrition, which have been by far the biggest killers in Darfur.

Fourth, Khartoum has systematically denied access to journalists and human rights investigators, and repressed independent Darfurian civil society groups, thus robbing us of another means of independently ascertaining what is happening today in Darfur, or gathering evidence about past crimes. Illustratively, there is a total media blackout of the attacks being undertaken now in Darfur.

Fifth, the Bashir administration has intimidated aid agencies and UN bodies so no independent information gets released about human rights issues, because to do so would mean certain expulsion for the responsible organization.

So when the word genocide gets raised and debated, we would make a plea to spotlight what is happening now to cover up the human rights crimes that have been and are being committed, losing the evidence to the vast sands of the Sahara Desert. We also hope that debate can eventually fixate on how to integrate the need for justice into more intensive peace-making efforts in both Darfur and southern Sudan. For peace to have a chance, peace efforts must be leveraged with real consequences for crimes against humanity, whether they are called genocide or not.

*John Prendergast is cofounder of Enough, the project to end genocide and crimes against humanity at the Center for American Progress. He is the author with Don Cheadle of the forthcoming book, "The Enough Moment." Omer Ismail is senior adviser to Enough and also serves as vice president for advocacy at Darfur Peace and Development.*