

WORLD SUDAN

## The Forgotten War in Sudan

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### The world has moved on, but the suffering continues

Sudan's Foreign Minister Ali Ahmed Karti wanted to talk about Jesus, not the mounting allegations that his country's military forces have committed war crimes. "I deem myself a follower of Jesus," Karti, a devout Muslim, told TIME on Feb. 4 in his suite at the Washington Hilton, as his aide served mint-flavored water. "His directives are suitable for Muslims and for Christians."



Andrew McConnell—UNHCR

A refugee from Sudan's Nuba Mountains fishes in South Sudan

The hotel where he spoke was filled with thousands of religious and political leaders from different faiths and nations bringing much the same message to an annual gathering hosted by the Fellowship Foundation—an under-the-radar, conservative evangelical organization that calls itself "a network of friends"—that takes place every year in Washington as part of the National Prayer Breakfast. For two days, dignitaries like the Dalai Lama and Filipino boxer Manny Pacquiao mingled behind closed doors, chatting about everything from Jesus to Middle East peace negotiations, before they received an address from President Barack Obama. "When we come together on this basis, I think it will be easy for us to get through and open hearts," Karti said.

But Karti's presence, at a time when he is lobbying to remove Sudan from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, nonetheless made many uncomfortable. Senator Bob Casey Jr., a congressional co-chair of the Breakfast, objected to Karti's invitation to a meeting the Fellowship had scheduled with Secretary of State John Kerry and other diplomats during Karti's visit. Over the past three decades, Sudan's government has been implicated in what Congress has termed two genocides, one in the nation's south that cost as many as 2 million lives, in part from famine, and one in the nation's western province of Darfur, where an additional 300,000 people died, according to the U.N. The country's President, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Karti oversaw the Popular Defense Force militias for a time during the first genocide. According to State Department cables released by WikiLeaks, Karti is also credited with organizing the janjaweed militia, the brutal forces that terrorized Darfur.

The trouble continues. As Karti spoke of his affection for Jesus and his teachings, the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) was preparing to reveal a report on gruesome mass rapes in late October in the Darfur village of Tabit, perpetrated by the Sudanese Armed Forces. And miles away, in the center of Sudan's South Kordofan region, reports of civilian casualties from government bombing and artillery were arriving daily, as the dry season allows Khartoum to resume its campaign to reassert control in its border states. Just three weeks earlier, on Jan. 20, the Sudanese air force bombed a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital for the second time, closing the facility and forcing MSF's Belgian team to pull its mission out of the country completely. "It is not any different than what is happening in Syria," says Tom Catena, a U.S. surgeon who runs the only

full-scale hospital for the nearly 1 million civilians caught in the Nuba Mountains region of South Kordofan. "It just has been going on three decades longer."

When TIME questioned Karti in Washington about these reports, the Foreign Minister grew testy. Karti repeatedly denied any government wrongdoing, even when a reporter showed him an iPhone with photos taken days earlier by Catena displaying burned children and legless women, victims who had told Catena they were hit by government forces. Karti insisted that the government targets only combatants. "Nothing of that is happening," Karti said, averting his eyes from the images. "Nobody is targeting his own people. What happens is that those rebels, they get in the villages sometimes, they do it themselves, and they send it to you, to here, to the media."

The U.S. government disputes Karti's denial. Aerial bombardments by the government are routine—it is the only force in the region with planes—and the violence is one reason for the continued U.S. sanctions against Sudan. "The tactics used tend to have a greater impact on civilian populations," says Donald Booth, U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan and South Sudan. "We have continually urged the government of Sudan to avoid targeting civilian populations and trying to use civilians in the military strategy they are pursuing."

The most damning evidence against the government of Sudan came in the HRW report documenting mass military rapes in Tabit. Though the African Union United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) failed to find evidence that the rapes happened at all—government forces prevented peacekeepers from carrying out a credible investigation, and Sudan eventually shut the UNAMID's human-rights office in Khartoum before expelling two senior U.N. officials from the country altogether—HRW spent two months compiling evidence of the deliberate Sudanese army attacks.

At least 221 women and girls were raped in Tabit over 36 hours beginning on Oct. 30, 2014, the report found. HRW recorded 27 firsthand reports of rape, 194 other credible accounts of rape, and even confessions by two soldiers who said superior officers ordered them to "rape women" because the women were rebel supporters. Authorities then launched a cover-up, HRW found, which included detaining and torturing Tabit residents for telling the truth about what happened. "It's the same strategy, the same tactics, by the same people," says Andrew Natsios, the former U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan under President George W. Bush.

Karti said any claims of rape in Tabit were lies invented to keep people in refugee camps, where NGOs can make money. Tabit has been rebuilt, he added, with modern schools, health care and police centers. "Nobody can expect a village like Tabit—which had been a home for some hundreds of the soldiers there, they have their homes there, they have their wives there, and they are living in a camp near that place—no one will expect those soldiers will come and rape by hundreds in that village," he asserted. "Not only the police is there, but the army is there, and it will protect you against anyone who will infringe your security."

#### The Forever War

Giving the associates of alleged war criminals permission to visit the U.S. is a reminder that the Obama Administration has complex goals in Africa. Obama entered the White House as a Sudan hawk; his 2008 campaign criticized the Bush Administration for inaction, and his Blueprint for Change promised immediate steps to end the genocide in Darfur. He also co-sponsored the 2006 Darfur Peace and Accountability Act, which denied visas and entry to any individuals or associates responsible for acts of genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity in Darfur. Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times hailed Obama's election as a "new chance" for Darfur. "Sudan fears the Obama Administration," Kristof wrote in December 2008, "and now for the first time in years, there's a real chance of ousting President al-Bashir and ending his murderous regime."

That never happened. If anything, trying to craft policy on Sudan has only become more complicated. South Sudan gained independence in 2011—a development Booth champions as a White House accomplishment—but Sudan's division failed to end the violence. The north kept the "Two Areas" of South Kordofan and Blue Nile, which both border South Sudan and in which rebel groups, many of whom used to be allied with what is now South Sudan, are still deeply entrenched. As the two countries split, the southern areas of Sudan saw an influx of government and rebel fighters who were

returning home from battlegrounds farther south. Soon that border region was dubbed the "new South," replacing the now independent South Sudan that had been the source of rebellion against Khartoum for the past 30 years. Fighting between the government and an array of rebel groups in the region has been ongoing in the years since, with both sides accused of targeting civilians.

In late 2013, the Sudan government deployed newly created, paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, recruited from the remnants of the janjaweed, to the region. At the same time, Khartoum grew tangled in South Sudan's new civil war, which has already seen 50,000 dead and 2 million displaced since fighting broke out in December 2013 between factions loyal to President Salva Kiir and to former Vice President Riek Machar. "You have a failed state, and you split it into two. What do you get?" asks Omer Ismail, a senior adviser for the nonprofit Enough project, which aims to end genocide and crimes against humanity. "You get two failed states."

While all this has unfolded, Sudan has launched a charm offensive in the West. Sudan's President al-Bashir has had a relatively successful few years in Washington, as his government lobbies to get out from under U.S. sanctions, which prohibit the import of Sudanese goods or services to the U.S. and the export of U.S. goods, services and technologies to Sudan. Kerti had two meetings with Kerry in 2013, as well as a meeting with former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton the year before. Kerti addressed the U.N. General Assembly in September and then gave a keynote at the U.N. International Day of Peace in Charlotte, N.C., an event hosted by a local, interfaith United Religions Initiative group.

Ibrahim Ghandour, the deputy chairman of al-Bashir's National Congress Party, came to Washington the week following the National Prayer Breakfast to meet with Booth, two days before HRW released its report on the mass rapes. "Right now we are trying to begin a more serious discussion with them about the range of issues that are of concern to us," says Booth, "and they in turn will continue to raise the issues of concern to them."

The Sudan government also hired D.C. lawyer Bart Fisher in 2011 to help Khartoum unravel the U.S. sanctions. Fisher, who runs his own law office, petitions the Treasury's Office of Foreign Asset Control to free specific sectors for trade and commerce. (His license does not allow him to lobby.) He works the legal end to do everything from permitting Sudan to import spare parts for civil aircraft to laying the groundwork for Khartoum's having an Apple Store one day.

Right now he is working to open commerce for the White Nile Sugar Co., which runs the world's largest and cheapest vertically integrated sugar-production facility, in Sudan's West Nile State—a mill that he says supports some 50,000 people in the region. "The truth of the matter is that this regime in Sudan has done what it said it would do—it allowed South Sudan to secede," Fisher says. "Obama hinted strongly he would relieve sanctions if Sudan carried out the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. That's sort of like Charlie Brown and Lucy moving the football."

It's not so simple. It's true that the Sudan government has been fighting an array of rebel groups, but its tactics have been heavily criticized. According to the U.N., the Sudanese Armed Forces burned an average of about 22 villages a day in Darfur over the first half of last year. "What the Sudanese have liked to do in the past is basically to say, 'O.K., tell us what we need to do, one, two, and three, and then if we do it, then all this will go away,'" Booth says. "What we found is in general, that while they can say we didn't follow through—we've moved the goalposts is an argument we hear a lot—there were also other things that happened." Natsios puts it more bluntly: "The Sudanese government signs agreements all the time, and then they never follow them. They're just pieces of paper."

#### Turning the Page?

Though the killing hasn't stopped, Sudan is no longer the cause célèbre it once was. There is no shortage of other foreign crises demanding global attention, from ISIS to Syria to Ukraine, and 2016 presidential hopefuls have, so far, all been silent on Sudan. The Obama Administration says it continues to press both Khartoum and armed opposition groups. The message to both is similar: There is no military solution to this sort of internal conflict, only a political one. "The Administration has paid a lot of attention to Sudan and South Sudan and will continue to do so," Booth says. "Our

primary focus is on trying to bring about an end to the ongoing conflicts, so that those who are alive can remain alive, and to end the suffering of people in Darfur and in the Two Areas.”

This is an ambitious goal. Fighting continues on both sides of the Sudan–South Sudan border, perpetrated by rebel groups and government forces. So does the suffering. Catena, the surgeon who runs Mother of Mercy Hospital in the Nuba Mountains, is left to treat the burned children that Karti dismissed. The hospital is just now overcoming a measles epidemic—1,400 patients were admitted with the highly contagious disease over the past eight months. The Sudanese government blocks all humanitarian aid to the region, which means the population gets no vaccines or drugs for common but deadly ailments like TB or malaria. Yet the reaction in the West is muted. “Sudan deserves better,” says the Enough project’s Ismail. “We need the world to hear from us.”

Karti believes the U.S. may somehow decide to bring an end to its sanctions regime, much as it recently began to with another outlaw country after a 50-year trade embargo. “Maybe, through time, we’ll be able to go through the same line of Cuba,” says Karti. It seems Khartoum believes that its crimes are in the past—and the rest of the world should move on. Or as Fisher puts it: “With Sudan, it’s time to turn the page.” But the lessons of Cuba suggest the opposite. When both political parties agree, the U.S. can be slow to forgive or forget.

—WITH REPORTING BY NOAH RAYMAN/NEW YORK

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