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'Second genocide going on in South Sudan'

4 May 2012

THE SATURDAY INTERVIEW

Dr Mukesh Kapila is Professor of Global Health and Humanitarian Affairs at the University of Manchester. In 2003-4, he acted as the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for UN operations in Darfur, Sudan, and is the former Special Adviser to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva. Indian by birth, he is currently based in Geneva and the UK. Last week, the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously on a resolution threatening South Sudan and Sudan with economic and diplomatic sanctions should the two countries fail to enter peace talks. The escalating conflict between the two countries since South Sudan's independence in July 2011 involves what some media and NGO commentators have described as a second Sudanese genocide. Dr Kapila visited South Sudan in March, 2012 and spoke to LARA CHOKSEY about some of his experiences and thoughts about the conflict.

Can you give us a brief history of the conflict?

The conflict has come from one main cause: the tension between the Arabs and the non-Arabs. The non-Arabs are the various black African tribes who inhabit the South, as well as the periphery of Sudan in places such as Darfur. The growth of intolerance and discrimination in the Sudan is a very modern phenomenon. Ever since independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule in the 1950s, there has been an internal war. In order to keep a grip on power, the Arab groups ~ the dominant central authority in Khartoum ~ have fostered an increasingly curricular sense of 'us and them'. The Arabs and non-Arabs fought each other to a standstill, and South Sudan became independent in July 2011.

What is the political situation in the two countries at this point?

Former members of the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) now rule South Sudan. The President is Salva Kiir, the former Vice-President of Sudan. North Sudan continues to be ruled by the Omar al-Bashir government. Al-Bashir was found by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to be guilty of crimes against humanity in 2009. Sudan has been stirring up trouble in South Sudan by arming dissident groups to create internal conflict among tribals within the new South Sudan, and at the same time, South Sudan is host to the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), an element of which is fighting Khartoum within the territories of the new South Sudan.

What are the causes of the current conflict?

The current conflict is centred on oil and land demarcation, particularly over the boundary between Sudan and South Sudan. China, India and Malaysia are leading the investment for oil production, and are remaining close to both sides. Most of the oil is in South Sudan, but the pipelines are in the north. The loss of oil completely changed the economics of Sudan, reflected in the fact that the Sudanese currency started depreciating because they did not have the oil to back it up. Both sides disagree on where the boundary between north and south lies, because that has a huge bearing on whether future oil wells are in South Sudan or Sudan. In the peace agreement that led to the creation of South Sudan, the future of the oil-rich South Kordofan and Blue Nile territories was to be decided by referendum of the local people. This referendum has not happened. Subsequently, there has been a progressive cleansing operation in

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these territories to increase the Arab component of the population and reduce the black African population.

How do your recent experiences in South Sudan compare to what you witnessed in Darfur in 2003?

There is a second genocide going on in the Nuba Mountains. I travelled there last month, and I saw things that I'd seen in Darfur 10 years ago. There were Antonov aeroplanes bombing villages, as well as also something new ~ the use of landmines and cluster bombs. In the last 10 years, the technology of war has changed. Modern, sophisticated warfare is being visited against these people. In the Nuba mountains, the same people who committed the same crimes in Darfur ~ President Omal al-Bashir, defense minister Abdul-Rahim Mohamed Hussein and South Kordofan governor Ahmed Haroun ~ are doing it again. The war you see between south and north over the issues of oil and land demarcation: these issues are just proxy for a much greater injustice, which is that Sudan is committing genocidal carnage on its own people.

Will the UN resolution that was passed last week help to address this?

The resolution only threatens economic sanctions and says nothing on stopping arms flows. Nor does it say anything on the ongoing genocidal violence in the Nuba Mountains (and Darfur). Without that being addressed there can be no real peace. So I am not optimistic that this approach will achieve long-term results. It may lead to a temporary lull in the fighting but I would be pleasantly surprised if it led to a solution to the underlying problems. However, it is good that China is now getting alarmed. The silence of India is disappointing.

What else could the international community do to prevent a full-scale war?

The focus on fighting between Sudan and South Sudan is obscuring the real human rights atrocities that are taking place in the Nuba Mountains. It is only by addressing those atrocities at the same time as oil and border disputes that we are going to see a sustained settlement. The grievances of the people will continue until there is regime change in Khartoum. Resolution can only happen if al-Bashir is deposed, arrested and brought to The Hague to stand trial. Clearly, just removing one man doesn't resolve the situation. But with al-Bashir going, the power structure will change. A fair deal will have to be done on behalf of and including the people who have been injured most in the last 10 years. That would mean recognising their status as equal citizens, giving them a degree of autonomy, setting up investigations – whether it's truth and reconciliation type structures or providing some compensation. You can't compensate for these things, but you can do something to acknowledge them. The country desperately needs a better economic formula for equitable development.

Should South Sudan and Sudan be united again?

No. South Sudan is now independent. There is no going back from that, at least not in our lifetime. By removing the regime in Khartoum and by bringing accountability and justice, there is the basis for a principled foundation for rebuilding confidence amongst different groups and moving on. If you don't have those principled foundations of accountability and justice, then there is no basis for settlement. In the case of Sudan, accountability means bringing to trial the perpetrators who have committed mass murder in the past decade. Until that happens ~ whatever the future brings ~ conflict will continue.

What kind of infrastructure does South Sudan have?

It's in the nature of new countries that their capacities are very limited. Other than a small stretch near the airport in the capital, Juba, not a single road has been built in the whole country. The legacy of Khartoum's stewardship of its southern people since 1956 until 2011 is basically nothing. There is no electricity, no infrastructure, no education, and no healthcare. The new South Sudan government is starting from where any other country would have perhaps 200 years ago. The government wants to build a new pipe going south to Kenya, but that's going to cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

You mentioned India's investment in Sudan's oil. Does India have a responsibility in helping to resolve this conflict?

So far, India has played a very passive role. India's policy is non-interference in other country's internal affairs, as is China's. But non-interference does not mean taking a passive 'hear no evil, see no evil' approach. By being silent, a country sends the message that it is permissible to slaughter hundreds of thousands of people. India is a nation that aspires to be a world power, both morally and ethically, and it does not deserve its position on the Security Council if it does not also see itself as a constructive moral leader in the world.

It might be argued that India has its own domestic conflicts and is

not in a position to speak on external domestic situations.

India is a developing country, but a democratic one. In a democracy you always have the potential to make things better, and in a totalitarian regime, you don't. The democratic potential may not be realised, but as long as it is there, it makes all the difference in the world. Indian diplomacy should be concerned with helping other countries along a constructive path. India's future interests lie in trade and exporting and in providing products and services, and Africa has some of the world's fastest growing markets. Some African growth rates are well over 10 per cent ~ higher than India or China. It is in India's interests to have peaceful, prosperous consumers.

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