

War of the Future:

Oil Drives the Genocide in Darfur by David Morse

A war of the future is being waged right now in the sprawling desert region of northeastern Africa known as Sudan. The weapons themselves are not futuristic. None of the ray-guns, force-fields, or robotic storm troopers that are the stuff of science fiction; nor, for that matter, the satellite-guided Predator drones or other high-tech weapon systems at the cutting edge of today's arsenal.

No, this war is being fought with Kalashnikovs, clubs and knives. In the western region of Sudan known as Darfur, the preferred tactics are burning and pillaging, castration and rape -- carried out by Arab militias riding on camels and horses. The most sophisticated technologies deployed are, on the one hand, the helicopters used by the Sudanese government to support the militias when they attack black African villages, and on the other hand, quite a different weapon: the seismographs used by foreign oil companies to map oil deposits hundreds of feet below the surface.

This is what makes it a war of the future: not the slick PowerPoint presentations you can imagine in boardrooms in Dallas and Beijing showing proven reserves in one color, estimated reserves in another, vast subterranean puddles that stretch west into Chad, and south to Nigeria and Uganda; not the technology; just the simple fact of the oil.

This is a resource war, fought by surrogates, involving great powers whose economies are predicated on growth, contending for a finite pool of resources. It is a war straight out of the pages of Michael Klare's book, Blood and Oil; and it would be a glaring example of the consequences of our addiction to oil, if it were not also an invisible war.

Invisible?

Invisible because it is happening in Africa. Invisible because our mainstream media are subsidized by the petroleum industry. Think of all the car ads you see on television, in newspapers and magazines. Think of the narcissism implicit in our automobile culture, our suburban sprawl, our obsessive focus on the rich and famous, the giddy assumption that all this can continue indefinitely when we know it can't -- and you see why Darfur slips into darkness. And Darfur is only the tip of the sprawling, scarred state known as Sudan. Nicholas Kristof pointed out in a New York Times column that ABC News had a total of 18 minutes of Darfur coverage in its nightly newscasts all last year, and that was to the credit of Peter Jennings; NBC had only 5 minutes, CBS only 3 minutes. This is, of course, a micro-fraction of the time devoted to Michael Jackson.

Why is it, I wonder, that when a genocide takes place in Africa, our attention is always riveted on some black American miscreant superstar? During the genocide in Rwanda ten years ago, when 800,000 Tutsis were slaughtered in 100 days, it was the trial of O.J. Simpson that had our attention.

Yes, racism enters into our refusal to even try to understand Africa, let alone value African lives. And yes, surely we're witnessing the kind of denial that Samantha Power documents in A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide; the sheer difficulty we have

acknowledging genocide. Once we acknowledge it, she observes, we pay lip-service to humanitarian ideals, but stand idly by.

And yes, turmoil in Africa may evoke our experience in Somalia, with its graphic images of American soldiers being dragged through the streets by their heels.

But all of this is trumped, I believe, by something just as deep: an unwritten conspiracy of silence that prevents the media from making the connections that would threaten our petroleum-dependent lifestyle that would lead us to acknowledge the fact that the industrial world's addiction to oil is laying waste to Africa.

When Darfur does occasionally make the news -- photographs of burned villages, charred corpses, malnourished children -- it is presented without context. In truth, Darfur is part of a broader oil-driven crisis in northern Africa. An estimated 300 to 400 Darfuri are dying every day. Yet the message from our media is that we Americans are "helpless" to prevent this humanitarian tragedy, even as we gas up our SUVs with these people's lives.

Even Kristof -- whose efforts as a mainstream journalist to keep Darfur in the spotlight are worthy of a Pulitzer -- fails to make the connection to oil; and yet oil was the driving force behind Sudan's civil war. Oil is driving the genocide in Darfur. Oil drives the Bush administration's policy toward Sudan and the rest of Africa. And oil is likely to topple Sudan and its neighbors into chaos.

The Context for Genocide

I will support these assertions with fact. But first, let's give Sudanese government officials in Khartoum their due. They prefer to explain the slaughter in Darfur as an ancient rivalry between nomadic herding tribes in the north and black African farmers in the south. They deny responsibility for the militias and claim they can't control them, even as they continue to train the militias, arm them, and pay them.

They...portray themselves as pragmatists struggling to hold together an impoverished and backwards country; all they need is more economic aid from the West, and an end to the trade sanctions imposed by the U.S. in 1997, when President Clinton added Sudan to the list of states sponsoring terrorism. Darfur, from their perspective, is an inconvenient anomaly that will go away, in time.

The real driving force behind the North-South conflict became clear after Chevron discovered oil in southern Sudan in 1978. The traditional competition for water at the fringes of the Sahara was transformed into quite a different struggle. The Arab-dominated government in Khartoum redrew Sudan's jurisdictional boundaries to exclude the oil reserves from southern jurisdiction. Thus began Sudan's 21-year-old North-South civil war. The conflict then moved south, deep into Sudan, into wetter lands that form the headwaters of the Nile and lie far from the historical competition for water.

Oil pipelines, pumping stations, well-heads, and other key infrastructure became targets for the rebels from the South, who wanted a share in the country's new mineral wealth, much of which

was on lands they had long occupied. John Garang, leader of the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), declared these installations to be legitimate targets of war. For a time, the oil companies fled from the conflict, but in the 1990s they began to return. Chinese and Indian companies were particularly aggressive, doing much of their drilling behind perimeters of bermed earth guarded by troops to protect against rebel attacks.

It was a Chinese pipeline to the Red Sea that first brought Sudanese oil to the international market. Prior to the discovery of oil, this dusty terrain had little to offer in the way of exports.

Most of the arable land was given over to subsistence farming: sorghum and food staples; cattle and camels. Some cotton was grown for export. Sudan, sometimes still called The Sudan, is the largest country in Africa and one of the poorest. Nearly a million square miles in area, roughly the size of the United States east of the Mississippi, it is more region than nation. Embracing some 570 distinct peoples and dozens of languages and historically ungovernable, its boundaries had been drawn for the convenience of colonial powers. Its nominal leaders in the north, living in urban Khartoum, were eager to join the global economy -- and oil was to become their country's first high-value export.

South Sudan is overwhelmingly rural and black. Less accessible from the north, marginalized under the reign of the Ottoman Turks in the nineteenth century, again under the British overlords during much of the twentieth, and now by Khartoum in the north, **South Sudan today is almost devoid of schools, hospitals, and modern infrastructure.**

Racism figures heavily in all this. Arabs refer to darker Africans as "*abeed*," a word that means something close to "slave." During the civil war, African boys were kidnapped from the south and enslaved; many were pressed into military service by the Arab-dominated government in Khartoum. Racism continues to find expression in the brutal rapes now taking place in Darfur. Khartoum recruits the militias, called *Janjaweed* -- itself a derogatory term -- from the poorest and least educated members of nomadic Arab society.

In short, the Khartoum regime has manipulated ethnic, racial, and economic tensions, as part of a strategic drive to commandeer the country's oil wealth. The war has claimed about two million lives, mostly in the south -- many by starvation, when government forces prevented humanitarian agencies from gaining access to camps. Another four million Sudanese remain homeless. The regime originally sought to impose shariah, or Islamic, law on the predominantly Christian and animist South. Khartoum dropped this demand, however, under terms of the Comprehensive Peace Treaty signed last January. The South was to be allowed to operate under its own civil law, which included rights for women; and in six years, southerners could choose by plebiscite whether to separate or remain part of a unified Sudan. The all-important oil revenues would be divided between Khartoum and the SPLA-held territory. Under a power-sharing agreement, SPLA commander John Garang would be installed as vice president of Sudan, alongside President Omar al-Bashir.

Darfur, to the west, was left out of this treaty. In a sense, the treaty -- brokered with the help of the U.S. -- was signed at the expense of Darfur, a parched area the size of France, sparsely populated but oil rich.

It has an ancient history of separate existence as a kingdom lapping into Chad, separate from the area known today as Sudan. Darfur's population is proportionately more Muslim and less Christian than southern Sudan's, but is mostly black African, and identifies itself by tribe, such as the Fur. (Darfur, in fact, means "land of the Fur.") The Darfuri practice of Islam was too lax to suit the Islamists who control Khartoum.

And so Darfuri villages have been burned to clear the way for drilling and pipelines, and to remove any possible sanctuaries for rebels. Some of the land seized from black farmers is reportedly being given to Arabs brought in from neighboring Chad.

Oil and Turmoil

With the signing of the treaty last January, and the prospect of stability for most of war-torn Sudan, new seismographic studies were undertaken by foreign oil companies in April. These studies had the effect of doubling Sudan's estimated oil reserves, bringing them to at least 563 million barrels. They could yield substantially more. Khartoum claims the amount could total as much as 5 billion barrels. That's still a pittance compared to the 674 billion barrels of proven oil reserves possessed by the six Persian Gulf countries -- Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Iran, and Qatar. The very modesty of Sudan's reserves speaks volumes to the desperation with which industrial nations are grasping for alternative sources of oil. The rush for oil is wreaking havoc on Sudan.

Oil revenues to Khartoum have been about \$1 million a day, exactly the amount which the government funnels into arms -- helicopters and bombers from Russia, tanks from Poland and China, missiles from Iran. Thus, oil is fueling the genocide in Darfur at every level. This is the context in which Darfur must be understood -- and, with it, the whole of Africa. The same Africa whose vast tapestry of indigenous cultures, wealth of forests and savannas was torn apart by three centuries of theft by European colonial powers -- seeking slaves, ivory, gold, and diamonds -- is being devastated anew by the 21st century quest for oil.

Sudan is now the seventh biggest oil producer in Africa after Nigeria, Libya, Algeria, Angola, Egypt, and Equatorial Guinea.

Oil has brought corruption and turmoil in its wake virtually wherever it has been discovered in the developing world. Second only perhaps to the arms industry, its lack of transparency and concentration of wealth invites kickbacks and bribery, as well as distortions to regional economies.

"There is no other commodity that produces such great profit," said Terry Karl in an interview with Miren Gutierrez, for the International Press Service, "and this is generally in the context of

highly concentrated power, very weak bureaucracies, and weak rule of law." Karl is co-author of a **Catholic Relief Services report on the impact of oil in Africa, entitled Bottom of the Barrel**. He cites the examples of Gabon, Angola and Nigeria, which began exploiting oil several decades ago and suffer from intense corruption. In Nigeria, as in Angola, an overvalued exchange rate has destroyed the non-oil economy. Local revolts over control of oil revenues also have triggered sweeping military repression in the Niger delta.

Oil companies and [oil] exploration companies like Halliburton wield political and sometimes military power. In Sudan, roads and bridges built by oil firms have been used to attack otherwise remote villages. **Canada's largest oil company, Talisman, is now in court for allegedly aiding Sudan government forces in blowing up a church and killing church leaders, in order to clear the land** for pipelines and drilling. Under public pressure in Canada, Talisman has sold its holdings in Sudan. Lundin Oil AB, a **Swedish company**, withdrew under similar pressure from human rights groups.

Michael Klare suggests that oil production is intrinsically destabilizing:

"When countries with few other resources of national wealth exploit their petroleum reserves, the ruling elites typically monopolize the distribution of oil revenues, enriching themselves and their cronies while leaving the rest of the population mired in poverty -- and the well-equipped and often privileged security forces of these 'petro-states' can be counted on to support them."

Compound these antidemocratic tendencies with the ravenous thirst of the rapidly growing Chinese and Indian economies, and you have a recipe for destabilization in Africa. China's oil imports climbed by 33% in 2004, India's by 11%. The International Energy Agency expects them to use 11.3 million barrels a day by 2010, which will be more than one-fifth of global demand.

Keith Bradsher, in a *New York Times* article, 2 Big Appetites Take Seats at the Oil Table, observes:

"As Chinese and Indian companies venture into countries like Sudan, where risk-averse multinationals have hesitated to enter, questions are being raised in the industry about whether state-owned companies are accurately judging the risks to their own investments, or whether they are just more willing to gamble with taxpayers' money than multinationals are willing to gamble with shareholders' investments."

The geopolitical implications of this tolerance for instability are borne out in Sudan, where Chinese state-owned companies exploited oil in the thick of fighting. As China and India seek strategic access to oil -- much as Britain, Japan, and the United States jockeyed for access to oil fields in the years leading up to World War II -- the likelihood of destabilizing countries like Sudan rises exponentially.

Last June, following the new seismographic exploration in Sudan and with the new power-sharing peace treaty about to be implemented, Khartoum and the **SPLA signed a flurry of oil deals with Chinese, Indian, British, Malaysian, and other oil companies.**

Desolate Sudan, Desolate World

This feeding frenzy may help explain the Bush administration's schizophrenic stance toward Sudan. On the one hand, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared in September 2004 that his government had determined that what was happening in Darfur was "genocide" -- which appears to have been a pre-election sop to conservative Christians, many with missions in Africa. On the other hand, not only did the President fall silent on Darfur after the election, but his administration has lobbied quietly against the Darfur Peace and Accountability Act in Congress.

That bill, now in committee, calls for beefing up the African Union peacekeeping force and imposing new sanctions on Khartoum, including referring individual officials to the International Criminal Court (much hated by the administration). The White House, undercutting Congressional efforts to stop the genocide, is seeking closer relations with Khartoum on grounds that the regime was "cooperating in the war on terror."

Nothing could end the slaughter faster than the President of the United States standing up for Darfur and making a strong case before the United Nations. Ours is the only country with such clout. This is unimaginable, of course, for various reasons. It seems clear that Bush, and the oil companies that contributed so heavily to his 2000 presidential campaign, would like to see the existing trade sanctions on Sudan removed, so U.S. companies can get a piece of the action. Instead of standing up, the President has kept mum -- leaving it to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to put the best face she can on his policy of appeasing Khartoum.

On July 8, SPLA leader John Garang was sworn in as vice president of Sudan, before a throng of 6 million cheering Sudanese. President Omar Bashir spoke in Arabic. Garang spoke in English, the preferred language among educated southerners, because of the country's language diversity. Sudan's future had never looked brighter. Garang was a charismatic and forceful leader who wanted a united Sudan. Three weeks later, Garang was killed in a helicopter crash. When word of his death emerged, angry riots broke out in Khartoum, and in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. Men with guns and clubs roamed the streets, setting fire to cars and office buildings. One hundred and thirty people were killed, thousands wounded.

No evidence of foul play in his death has been uncovered, as of this writing. The helicopter went down in rain and fog over mountainous terrain. Nevertheless, suspicions are rampant. SPLA and government officials are calling for calm, until the crash can be investigated by an international team of experts. All too ominously, the disaster recalls the 1994 airplane crash that killed Rwandan president, Juvenal Habyarimana, who was trying to implement a power-sharing agreement between Hutus and Tutsis. That crash touched off the explosive Rwandan genocide.

What Garang's death will mean for Sudan is unclear. The new peace was already precarious. His chosen successor, Salva Kiir Mayardit, appears less committed to a united Sudan

Nowhere is the potential impact of renewed war more threatening than in the camps of refugees -- the 4 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), driven from their homes during the North-South civil war, several hundred thousand encamped at the fringes of Khartoum as squatters or crowded into sprawling ghetto neighborhoods.

Further west, in Darfur and Chad, another 2.5 million IDPs live in the precarious limbo of makeshift camps, in shelters cobbled together from plastic and sticks -- prevented by the Janjaweed from returning to their villages, wholly dependent on outside aid.

In short, Sudan embodies a collision between a failed state and a failed energy policy. Increasingly, ours is a planet whose human population is devoted to extracting what it can, regardless of the human and environmental cost. The Bush energy policy, crafted by oil companies, is predicated on a far different future from the one any sane person would want his or her children to inherit -- a desolate world that few Americans, cocooned by the media's silence, are willing to imagine.

-David Morse is an independent journalist and political analyst whose articles and essays have appeared in Dissent, Esquire, Friends Journal, the Nation, the New York Times Magazine, the Progressive Populist, Salon, and elsewhere. His novel, The Iron Bridge (Harcourt Brace, 1998), predicted a series of petroleum wars in the first two decades of the 21st century.