Don’t Forget Darfur

By ERIC REEVES    FEB. 11, 2016

Northampton, Mass. — Darfur may have dropped out of international headlines, but that does not mean the region enjoys peace. Far from it. A renewed escalation of violence by the Sudanese government against non-Arab ethnic groups threatens to compound a humanitarian disaster that, according to United Nations estimates, over the past 13 years displaced more than 2.7 million people in Darfur and an additional 380,000 refugees to eastern Chad.

Darfur has become a focus again because the regime in Khartoum is desperate to end one of three active rebellions in the country, conflicts that have left its military badly overstretched while a failing economy is causing civil unrest.

A campaign by regular government forces, once again working in concert with Arab militias, has moved westward from North Darfur to the strategic Jebel Marra massif. The assault on the Darfuri rebels there began in earnest in mid-January and has reportedly involved tanks, artillery and aerial bombing — the latter often inaccurate and resulting in heavy civilian casualties, the overwhelming majority of them African farmers and their families.

The United Nations estimates that in the first 10 days of the current assault, an additional 34,000 people were displaced, most of them women and children. This is probably an underestimate, but accurate figures are hard to
come by, in part because Sudan has long excluded both journalists and relief workers from most of Jebel Marra.

The trek to camps for displaced persons is long and arduous, and these refugees are vulnerable to assaults by pro-government forces. The camps themselves are threatened; they have been attacked with greater frequency and violence in recent years. Sudan’s second vice president, Hassabo Abdelrahman, recently declared that “2016 will see the end of displacement in Darfur” — a remark seen by many as a threat to dismantle the refugee camps.

Darfur was widely recognized as the first genocide of the 21st century. In 2006, Samantha Power, now the United States ambassador to the United Nations, described it that way; in 2007, so did Susan E. Rice, now President Obama’s national security adviser.

Despite such recognition, the joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping mission that deployed to Darfur in 2008 ultimately failed to stem the regime’s ethnic-cleansing program, which has included targeted rape. In the past eight years, more than two million civilians have been displaced, some for the third or fourth time. The suffering of the Darfuris has not diminished, but the concern of the international community apparently has.

The head of the regime for more than 25 years, President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, has been charged by the International Criminal Court with multiple counts of genocide and crimes against humanity in Darfur. Yet it seems unlikely the court’s arrest warrant will ever be served. International economic sanctions against Sudan have been too patchy and partial to bring results.

In the absence of effective deterrence, African-owned farmlands continue to be seized by Arab settlers. Crops are destroyed, and African farmers have been beaten, abducted and murdered by Arab militias and settlers.

Bad as things are, they will get worse if the Jebel Marra offensive is not halted. Stopping it will require the international community to act in a
concerted way. The United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, has been too passive on Darfur; he should bring up Khartoum’s new offensive at the Security Council.

To be sure, Russia and China may block action: Both have trade in arms with Sudan, and China has invested heavily there, particularly in the oil industry. But Mr. Ban could at least force a discussion in this forum, and highlight the Security Council resolutions that Khartoum has breached.

The African Union, too, has been far too accommodating of the Sudanese regime: Its Peace and Security Council needs to speak out about the military action in Jebel Marra and enforce a continentwide travel ban on the officials responsible.

The Europeans have also been too tolerant of Sudan’s behavior in Darfur; several countries — including Sweden, France and Germany — have permitted business and commercial ties with Khartoum in spite of atrocities. The European Union should threaten economic and financial sanctions like those the United States has imposed. For companies that want access to the American financial system, these sanctions have proved powerful deterrents to assisting Khartoum. In 2014, the French banking giant BNP Paribas was fined nearly $9 billion for violating United States sanctions.

Sudan has run up at least $46 billion in external debt, much of it for military purchases. It can neither service nor repay this debt, which is held primarily by Paris Club creditors, a group that includes many European nations. At the very least, Europe should declare that discussions of debt relief are dead in the water if the Jebel Marra offensive continues. The United States should use its leverage as a Paris Club member to pressure the Europeans to take serious action on Darfur.

Back in 2010, a State Department official spoke of “decoupling” Darfur from what Washington considered a key bilateral issue with Khartoum: counterterrorism intelligence. The proposal was for a lifting of sanctions in
return for cooperation on information about jihadists. The administration should rule out any such bargain unless there is an immediate end to the offensive.

Khartoum has a keen ear for cant. The words Mr. Bashir and his allies hear from the international community must have real consequences, or they will have no power to prevent a new chapter of tragedy in Darfur.

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