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Obama's Sudan Moment

Just as President Clinton faced his "Rwanda moment" in 1994, President Obama faces his "Sudan moment" now. When looking back, will Obama, like Clinton, express regret that the United States did not do more to save countless innocent lives? Or will President Obama keep the promises he made to the American people and to the people of Sudan to uphold the United States' committed responsibility to protect innocent people in the face of mass human rights abuses by a brutal government?

The question is urgent. Recent [news reports](#) suggest that a new strategy for U.S. policy on Sudan has landed on President Obama's desk. His key advisors are badly divided on how to approach Sudan. Special Envoy Scott Gration and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have reportedly recommended placing a higher priority on the upcoming referendum than on working to help end the [dire humanitarian crisis in Darfur](#) that seriously jeopardizes the fate of over 2 million displaced Darfuris. They also appear to favor incentives over pressures to influence the Sudanese government despite numerous egregious recent abuses by the brutal regime.

Ambassador Susan Rice is advocating for a tougher position -- consistent with the Administration's Sudan policy announced last year -- in which the U.S. government would keep the humanitarian and security crisis in Darfur a top priority by applying strong U.S. and multilateral pressure on Sudan when warranted.

The division within the Administration appears to be over which approach is most likely to avert all-out war in Sudan. The Government of Sudan's conduct in response to U.S. engagement with no consequences for continued oppression and human rights violations has resulted in an alarming deterioration of conditions throughout Sudan -- an arms build-up in the South, increasingly frequent deadly "tribal" conflicts, detentions and torture of civilians, and a two-year high in the number of reported deaths in Darfur. An honest assessment of the Administration's effect to date should make it clear that a balanced "all Sudan" approach is essential.

A wide range of American citizens, many of whom have worked for years to help end the Darfur genocide and bring peace to Sudan, are urging President Obama to make the right choice at this critical juncture. Tens of thousands of citizens have sent the President [emails](#) on the topic and others have [posted messages](#) on the White House Facebook page and via its Twitter account. On Tuesday, [student activists](#) held a vigil at Vice-President Biden's house in the hopes that the Vice President, who has historically been an informed and impassioned voice for peace and justice in Sudan, will help influence the President to make the right decision.

Additionally, on Tuesday, hundreds of US-based Darfuri expatriates issued a [press release](#) which reads in part:

The Government of Sudan feels absolutely immune to any accountability. Furthermore, the officials in Khartoum and South Darfur audaciously state their plans in dismantling the IDP camps in meetings with UNAMID and NGOs representatives. We believe that what is happening in Darfur has direct relation to the U. S. policy in handling Darfur's crisis. The international community has an obligation to protect the Darfuri civilians. This Responsibility-To-Protect (R2P) should be exercised now to stop the on-going genocide in Darfur.

Disputes within the Obama Administration that fall into the trap of prioritizing Darfur over the referendum or the referendum over Darfur play right into the hands of Omar al-Bashir, the president of Sudan who has been indicted for charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court. A master of the "divide and rule" strategy, Bashir wants nothing more than to pit Sudan's Southerners against Darfuris and U.S. officials who favor engagement to "save" the referendum against those who also want pressures in response to the ongoing human rights violations in Darfur.

"The US and other key countries have largely turned away from serious political engagement in Darfur in favor of the north-south issues," [said John Prendergast](#), co-founder of The Enough Project, an advocacy group. "By not focusing on an all-Sudan solution, they end up with no solution at all, and the crises bleed on."

As stated in the [email](#) sent to the President by thousands of Americans, "The U.S. government cannot de-prioritize the humanitarian and security crisis in Darfur. Moreover, it must learn from the past that a policy of offering the Government of Sudan incentives alone -- without also applying serious pressures - will not contribute to lasting peace in Sudan."

We must let President Obama know that we are closely watching his decision. Now is the moment for him to implement a Sudan policy that, as he promised in 2008, leads a process for peace in Darfur, helps prevent another deadly war in Africa, and holds those responsible for genocide and crimes against humanity to account.