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GUEST ESSAY

## The War the World Forgot

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A fire in a livestock market in El Fasher, in North Darfur, in September. Sudanese paramilitary and military forces are fighting for control of the region. Credit...Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

By Alex de Waal and Abdul Mohammed

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There's a genocide in the making in Darfur, Sudan — for the second time in 20 years. This time, the violence is happening on President Biden's watch, and he and his administration have not done enough to stop it. But there are two things Mr. Biden can do today that could have real impact: Stop America's Middle Eastern allies from arming the perpetrators and get behind a Kenyan-led African initiative to end the bloodshed.

In recent weeks, Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, a mercenary-commercial enterprise, has overrun four of the five main cities in Darfur, a region in western Sudan. Each conquest has been followed by massacre and pillage targeting communities of the cities' darker-skinned residents. After the Rapid Support Forces seized the town of Ardamata on Nov. 4, some [1,500 people were slaughtered](#), according to a Darfur human rights group. ([A local government official](#), while not denying the killings, said the exact number of dead could not be confirmed.)

The paramilitaries are mobile and ferocious, and their adversaries in the regular army, the Sudan Armed Forces in Darfur are demoralized and outgunned. It appears as though the Rapid Support Forces campaign will continue until there are no more cities left to pillage, and Darfur's non-Arabic-speaking communities are ethnically cleansed or reduced to underpaid laborers on land that was once their own. Hundreds of thousands of [terrified civilians are now sheltering](#) in the North Darfur capital, El Fasher, the only city in the region not yet overrun by the R.S.F. paramilitaries.

The Rapid Support Forces are the next-generation [Janjaweed](#), the militia that 20 years ago rampaged through scores of villages of people belonging to the Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa communities in Darfur. At that time, the Janjaweed had been mobilized by the president, Omar al-Bashir, to crush Darfuri rebels by way of decimating the region's non-Arab communities. Militiamen burned, killed, raped and looted. Tens of thousands of civilians were slaughtered. Hundreds of thousands perished from hunger and disease. The Janjaweed, drawn from

Arabic-speaking nomads from the desert edge — communities impoverished by decades of neglect along with drought and the advance of the Sahara — sought land and loot.

By September 2004, Secretary of State [Colin Powell](#) laid out evidence and declared that the Janjaweed had committed genocide. [George Clooney](#) and a host of other celebrities and politicians joined the Save Darfur Coalition to demand that President George W. Bush dispatch international troops to end the killing. They succeeded in focusing the world's attention on the unfolding crisis: USAID and the World Food Program mounted a major humanitarian operation in the region, and the United Nations and African Union dispatched peacekeepers.

The International Criminal Court also took up the Darfur atrocities, and issued a warrant for Mr. al-Bashir. After his ouster in 2019, the Sudanese authorities jailed Mr. al-Bashir on corruption charges, but they failed to hand him over to the court, where one Janjaweed commander is being tried. One of us, Mr. de Waal, was [the first expert witness](#) for the case last year.

Despite all that, a peace deal was not reached quickly, and three million people who had been displaced, most into vast relief camps, couldn't go home. The killing and burning subsided, and Mr. al-Bashir formalized the Janjaweed into the Rapid Support Forces, headed by the capable and ruthless Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan, widely known as Hemeti. Gold was also discovered in Darfur, [and soon the R.S.F. became](#) Sudan's biggest gold traders, exporting mostly to Dubai, as well as a supplier of mercenaries to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates' war in Yemen.

Only in 2020, after nonviolent civil protests ushered in a transitional government promising democracy for Sudan, did Darfur get its long-promised peace agreement. The Darfuri armed rebels returned home and their leaders took government jobs, and the non-Arab communities victimized in the last war began to hope that they might at last return to their former villages. A "joint security-keeping force" of all three parties — former rebels and units of the Sudan Armed Forces and the R.S.F. — was planned to protect civilians and keep the peace. A few months later, the United States joined with other Western governments [and shut down, at Sudan's urging, the U.N.-African Union Mission in Darfur](#), withdrawing all its international peacekeepers by mid-2021.

The peacekeepers' absence was keenly felt when a power struggle between the R.S.F.'s General Hamdan and the Sudan Armed Forces' Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan erupted into all-out war on April 15. Within days, violence exploded in Darfur too, with the R.S.F. and other associated Arab militias going after the same civilian groups they victimized last time around.

The R.S.F. attacks army units, but it is also committing crimes that may amount to genocide along the way — targeting specific ethnic groups with killing, displacement and starvation. General Hamdan and his senior commanders are careful in their public utterances to avoid anything that smacks of genocidal intent, but R.S.F. fighters are widely reported as using dehumanizing language typical of perpetrators of genocide. The R.S.F.'s killings and forced displacement campaign certainly fits within the [international understanding of ethnic cleansing](#). A looming fight to the death in El Fasher has all the warning lights for genocide flashing red.

For months, the former Darfuri rebels stayed out of the fight, despite violent attacks on their own communities. Only in mid-November, as the R.S.F. closed in on El Fasher and the people sheltering there, did the former rebels [declare they would fight](#) the paramilitary group. The former rebels are often better armed and more determined than the hapless regular army, but a battle involving all of these forces threatens a new blood bath of civilians.

All the while, six months of on-and-off talks in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, convened by the United States and the Saudis, have achieved little. General al-Burhan's army has stuck to an [absurdly maximalist](#) position, demanding that the R.S.F. withdraw to its bases and disarm. General Hamdan's R.S.F., winning on the ground on every front, sees no reason to back down. Every promise to pause hostilities, protect civilians or allow in humanitarian aid has been abrogated, without consequence.

Such is the R.S.F.'s evident contempt for the mediators that it launched its devastating Darfur offensive in October, apparently confident that it would earn at worst a mild rebuke. For the paramilitaries, [a plea by](#)

[Secretary of State Antony Blinken](#) in early November not to attack the citizens sheltering in El Fasher was empty words.

So far, the Biden administration's response to the spiraling crisis has been deeply insufficient. Though the administration has helped to convene the Jeddah cease-fire talks, and Mr. Blinken has issued his plea for restraint, neither appears to have made a discernible impact.

But Mr. Biden can take action that would help stop the slaughter. One is to call the president of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan. In an effort to become kingmaker in the region, the United Arab Emirates has been covertly shipping arms to the R.S.F., as documented by [The New York Times](#). Those weapons, which may include the drones the R.S.F. has used to devastating effect alongside its [converted pickup trucks](#) and S.U.V.s and Russian-supplied anti-aircraft missiles, appear to have swung the tide of the battle, allowing the paramilitaries to concentrate their firepower and overwhelm the army.

Up to now, confident that the Biden administration has many other priorities in the Middle East, Sheikh Mohammed has had a free hand to intervene on the other shore of the Red Sea, even if that means supporting a violent militia. It's unlikely that trying to stop the R.S.F.'s gold trade to Dubai would work. But, as he hosts the COP28 climate talks this month, Sheikh Mohammed surely cares about his reputation and could take a call from Mr. Biden advising him that it's unwise to be branded as a facilitator of a potential genocide.

Another key American ally, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, should also be on Mr. Biden's call list. Despite its misgivings over General al-Burhan's links to Islamists, Cairo backs the Sudan Armed Forces and may step up its involvement if it believes there is a chance the R.S.F. is about to take over Sudan, Egypt's southern neighbor. Mr. Biden should also appoint a presidential special envoy for Sudan, which Middle Eastern leaders with leverage are more likely to respond to than the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs, which they see as too junior.

Mr. Biden must also support Kenya. President William Ruto is eager to play a constructive role in stopping this crisis. Back in June, he led a quartet of East African states in proposing a comprehensive approach to peace. Mr. Ruto condemned both Sudanese generals as "illegitimate," warned that there were "[already signs of genocide](#)" in Darfur, and suggested that African peacekeepers might be needed.

When African states propose a formula for addressing an African crisis, world powers often put aside their differences and back it. By contrast, any U.S. proposal to dispatch blue helmets is sure to invite a veto from China or Russia at the U.N. Security Council. And if Washington focuses only on the cease-fire talks in Jeddah, that will almost certainly be a dead end. Working together with Egypt and the newly appointed [U.N. special envoy for Sudan](#), Mr. Ruto can propose actions that America cannot. He is pushing for an emergency summit of East African leaders next week, where he will have the chance to submit bold proposals.

Without action at the highest level, America risks becoming a near-silent witness to another genocide. Mr. Biden can change that. But he has only a few days left to make the call.

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