

GUEST ESSAY

The Unforgivable Silence on Sudan

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Credit...Zohra Bensemra/Reuters

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Silence. Last September, when I visited a makeshift hospital in Adré, Chad, where young Sudanese refugees were being treated for acute malnutrition, that was all I heard: an eerie silence.

I had tried to prepare myself for the wails of children who were sick and emaciated, but these patients were too weak to even cry. That day, I saw a 6-month-old baby who was the size of a newborn and a child whose ankles were swollen, and whose body was blistered, from severe malnourishment.

It was equal parts newly horrific and tragically familiar.

Twenty years earlier I had visited the same town and met with Sudanese refugees who fled violence in Darfur, where the janjaweed militia, with backing from Omar al-Bashir's brutal authoritarian regime, carried out a genocidal campaign of mass killing, rape and pillage.

Today, civil war has once again turned Sudan into a living hell. But even after [aid groups](#) designated the country's humanitarian crisis to be among the world's worst, little attention or help has gone to the Sudanese people.

For almost a year, I have been pushing the United Nations Security Council to speak out. On March 8, the Council [finally called](#) for an immediate cessation of hostilities. This is a positive step, but it is not nearly enough — and it does not change the fact that the international community and media outlets have been largely quiet.

The world's silence and inaction need to end, and end now.

The first thing that must happen is we must send a surge of humanitarian support to Sudan's most vulnerable. Eighteen million Sudanese face acute hunger, and [famine is looming](#). Nearly eight million people have been forced from their homes in what has become the world's largest internal displacement crisis. Measles, cholera and other preventable diseases have spread.

Since the start of this conflict, humanitarian workers have been on the ground, often putting their lives at risk to save others, but combatants on both sides of the war have deliberately undermined their efforts. The Sudanese Armed Forces has impeded the major humanitarian aid crossing from Chad into Darfur, and members of the rival Rapid Support Forces [are looting](#) humanitarian warehouses.

Regional and global leaders must unequivocally and publicly demand that the warring parties respect international humanitarian law and facilitate humanitarian access. If the parties don't listen, the Security Council must take swift action to ensure lifesaving aid is delivered and distributed. The Council should consider all tools at its disposal, including authorizing aid to move from Chad and South Sudan into Sudan, as the United Nations has done with cross-border aid into Syria. The United States is prepared to help lead this initiative.

We also believe that the United Nations should appoint a senior humanitarian official based outside Sudan to advocate humanitarian access, scale up relief efforts and mobilize international donors. The [World Food Program](#) warned that, unless new funds come in, it will be forced to cut off food assistance to hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees in Chad as early as next month. Just a tiny fraction of the [United Nations' humanitarian appeal](#) for Sudan has been met. This is unacceptable. The United States is the largest single donor nation to both efforts. Now other countries need to step up.

The international community must also demand the protection of civilians and pursue justice for victims of war crimes.

In the [2023 Elie Wiesel Act Report](#), the Biden administration warned of continuing reports of large-scale human rights abuses in Sudan. And in December, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [determined](#) that fighters on both sides had committed war crimes and that members of the Rapid Support Forces and allied militias had committed crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.

When I visited the Sudanese border last year, I [announced](#) U.S. sanctions on militia leaders who carried out abuses against civilians, including conflict-related sexual violence and ethnic-based killings. Since then, we have issued several more rounds of targeted sanctions.

We must break the cycle of impunity. We must demand accountability for those responsible for the horrors playing out before our eyes — horrors that are documented, in gruesome detail, in [a recently released U.N. report](#). Investigators found that women and girls, some as young as 14, have been brutally raped by Rapid Support Forces militiamen, that the group's snipers have indiscriminately targeted civilians and that entire villages have been burned down and their people massacred, among other atrocities. Late last year, according to the report, more than 1,000 Masalit and other non-Arab minorities were slaughtered in Ardamata, a village in West Darfur.

We should all stand behind the International Criminal Court's [continuing investigation](#) into allegations of war crimes in the region, local and international documentation efforts and other accountability initiatives.

Finally, we need to do everything in our power to stop the fighting and get Sudan back on the path to democracy.

Right now, a handful of regional powers are sending weapons into Sudan. This outside support is prolonging the conflict and enabling the atrocities taking place across West Darfur, including massacres reminiscent of the 2004 genocide. The Security Council has made clear that these illegal arms transfers, which violate the United Nations' arms embargo, must stop.

This conflict will not be solved on the battlefield. It will be solved at the negotiating table. Those with influence, particularly the African Union and leaders across East Africa and the Persian Gulf, must push the warring parties toward peace.

The Biden administration will continue to support these diplomatic efforts. Just last month, Secretary Blinken [appointed](#) Tom Perriello, who has significant experience in the region, as the U.S. special envoy to Sudan.

The United States is working to persuade relevant players to coalesce around the shared goal of preventing the breakup of Sudan, which would fuel instability across the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region. We are also working with courageous grass-roots leaders to build momentum toward a better future, in which the Sudanese people can realize their aspirations of a civilian, democratically elected government.

Through the sounds of gunfire and shelling, the people of Sudan have heard our silence. They ask why they have been forsaken; why they have been forgotten.

The international community must, at long last, speak out — and work together to end this senseless conflict.