

Humanitarian intervention in Darfur?

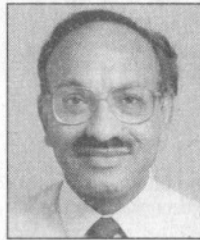
THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL last Friday adopted a resolution by virtue of which it demanded that the government in Khartoum disarm and prosecute within 30 days the militia accused of unleashing a "reign of terror" in Darfur failing which it will consider imposing punitive measures under Article 41 of its charter. This brought to an end the efforts made by a group of countries, principally from the developing world, to get the threat of sanctions removed and allow the government of Sudan breathing space to sort things out in the troubled region. Does the adoption of the resolution signal the inexorable march of the American-led military juggernaut in Darfur on humanitarian grounds? And if so, what are the possible motives behind it?

Before addressing these questions, a word about the Darfur conflict is in order. The west Darfur, which is the locus of conflict, has an estimated population of 1.7 million. What we are witnessing there is an ethnic clash between Arabs and Africans. The conflict started in February 2003 when the government in Khartoum started using the Arab militia called, Janjaweed, to put down rebellion by two African groups. The matter became complicated because al-Turabi, one of Sudan's popular politicians was suspected of involvement. Accused of "ethnic cleansing" and "crimes against humanity", the militia has been held responsible, according to the UN estimates, for 30,000 deaths and a million displaced people, some of who have become refugees in the neighbouring Chad. The Vatican has called the Darfur tragedy a "Rwanda in slow motion". The UN has described it as "the world's worst" humanitarian crisis.

A political dialogue under the auspices of the Arab Union was initiated between the concerned Sudanese parties in the neighbouring Chad in April this year. It led to the N'djamena agreement, which included a ceasefire. Appalled by massive human rights violations, the US Secretary of State Colin Powell and the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan visited Darfur in June this year as a result of which the Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir promised to try Janjaweed leaders believed to be responsible for atrocities, disarm the groups and grant freedom of movement to aid workers. Neither these promises nor the progress made so far (a Darfur court has convicted seven men of Janjaweed membership), satisfied the Western governments as they looked upon these measures as mere tokens.

The Sudanese government opposed the American-

COMMENT



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drafted resolution on the ground that it needed more time to restore order in Darfur and that sanctions would complicate things. This position found favour with almost all stakeholders in the international community except the US and the EU countries (this explains the nationality of all sponsors of the resolution except that of Chile). Security Council members like Pakistan, Algeria, Brazil, China and Russia were in favour of granting more time to Sudan to sort things out. Eventually, however, that all of them wilted under

the American pressure at the voting stage. The Arab League has similarly voiced its opposition to the idea of sanctions on the ground that an embargo would not help resolve the crisis. The Arab Union's attitude has been no different. In its communiqué of July 17, it emphasised the need to accelerate the implementation of the N'djamena agreement by all sides. Finally, on July 3, Kofi Annan and the Sudanese government settled on a 90-day period within which the latter was to address the issue.

The outrage expressed by the international community at the massive human rights violations in Darfur is utterly justified. No state guilty of such abuses can today hide behind the traditional concept of national sovereignty, as human rights issue has emerged as a norm, which is a legitimate concern for the international community (though intervention on humanitarian grounds is a different matter). The plea of reserved domain put forward by certain states in the present debate is therefore utterly unacceptable. However the plea by many members of the Arab League, Arab Union and UN Security Council for more time certainly had considerable merit. Heavens would not have fallen if a 90-day rather than a 30-day deadline was given to Sudan. How do we explain the tight timeframe pushed by the US-EU combine for conflict resolution in Darfur? The explanation is perhaps to be found in what is seen as the hidden agenda that the US is intent upon promoting through the Darfur resolution. The EU, unfortunately, is a junior partner.

Sanctions are invariably symptomatic of something more ominous and certain Western countries do not hide their true intentions in this regard. For example, characterising the crisis as "genocide" the US Congress has adopted a resolution in which it has urged the Bush Administration to lead international efforts to intervene in the region. The latter has not ruled out such a course of action though it has termed it premature at this stage. Similarly, the British government is reportedly (according to both the *Guardian* and the *Independent* newspapers) drawing up plans for a military intervention in Sudan. This report finds support in the statement of the British army chief who has announced his readiness to move into the troubled region with 5,000 troops. Further support is to be found in the statement of the British high commissioner in Pakistan who has advocated the right of military intervention on humanitarian grounds.

Dealing with the question of military intervention

on humanitarian grounds, one learns with consternation that it is part of the various interventionist theories aimed at meddling in the affairs of the Third World countries that recur in the contemporary Western political thought. In fact, they appear to be an important component of the new world order, which is in the process of emerging. They manifest themselves not only in terms of intervention on humanitarian grounds but also in the shape of pre-emptive strikes and as the right of intervention to stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The proliferation of such theories should not come as a surprise because a leopard never changes its spots. It may be instructive to note that according to Prof Bowett between 1813 and 1927 American troops intervened in the affairs of Latin American countries on at least 70 occasions on the ground of "protection of nationals abroad". Don't the present-day interventionist theories remind of this past?

Many in the international community think that domestic politics, rather than anything else, explains the supposed American outrage at human rights abuses. In their view, the threat of sanctions followed by military intervention against Sudan is nothing but a gimmick by the Bush Administration to divert attention during the presidential election year from the disaster that is Iraq which is likely to cost the latter the White House. In this perspective, the 90-day deadline does not make sense because it would have ended too close to the voting date to affect the outcome of presidential election.

There are many who view the Darfur resolution as providing an excellent opportunity to implement the neo-con agenda to redraw the boundaries of Muslim countries in and around the Middle East. The agenda overrides the good relations that the US and Sudan recently developed following cooperation between the two countries in the field of terrorism and removal of the latter's name from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism. In the end, irrespective of the American motives behind the Darfur resolution one is intrigued by the boundless American humanity for the sad plight of the people of Darfur and its total insensitivity to the horrendous atrocities committed by Israel against the Palestinians. Don't the double standards in the American attitude render the Darfur resolution bereft of any moral content?

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