

Ahistorical Rhetoric: Oil, Ethnicity and Genocide in South Sudan

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Summary

If one analyses the genocide in South Sudan from the definition by Travis (2008: 01), according to which genocide is “often the outcome acts designed to enrich a dominant racial, ethnic, religious or political group at the expense of smaller, weaker, or supposedly ‘inferior’ groups that possess valuable lands, monies, labour, or other resources”, it is possible to argue that the current genocide in South Sudan cannot be simplistically reduced to the failure of the newest state on the African continent to establish a functional bureaucracy or reduce it simply to ethnic conflict between the Dinka and Nuer. The genocide in South Sudan is a product of a process that has a long and complex history but one which has been ignored because those who can take meaningful action are benefiting from the mass murder as an economic policy. This article rejects the current media agenda which downplays the oil factor as a key contributor to the ongoing genocide, while amplifying the ethnicity card as an escapist way of exonerating the international failure to deal with and recognise a catastrophic genocide executed purely for economic reasons.

Opsomming

Wanneer 'n mens die volksmoord in Suid-Soedan ontleed op grond van die omskrywing deur Travis (2008: 01), waarvolgens volksmoord “dikwels die uitkomsthandelinge is wat ontwerp is om 'n dominante ras-, etniese, religieuse of politieke groep te verryk ten koste van kleiner, swakker of kwansuis ‘ondergeskikte’ groepe wat waardevolle grond, geld, arbeid of ander hulpbronne besit”, kan daar geredeneer word dat die huidige volksmoord in Suid-Soedan nie simplisties gereduseer kan word tot die versuim van die jongste staat op die Afrika-kontinent om as funksionele burokrasie te vestig of om dit eenvoudig as etniese konflik tussen die Dinka en Nuer af te maak nie. Die volksmoord in Suid-Soedan is 'n produk van 'n proses wat 'n lang, komplekse geskiedenis gehad het; en wat geïgnoreer is omdat diegene wat sinvol kan ingryp, voordeel trek uit die massamoord as 'n ekonomiese beleid. Hierdie artikel verwerp die huidige media-agenda wat die oliefaktor as 'n sleutelbydraer tot die voortslepende volksmoord onderspeel, terwyl dit die etnisiteitskaart versterk as 'n ontvlugter se manier om hulself daarvan te onthef om die wêreldwye versuim om 'n katastrofiese volksmoord wat suiwer om ekonomiese redes uitgevoer word, te hanteer en te erken.

The Complexities of the South Sudan Genocide

When one is asked what they know about South Sudan, one will certainly recall that, South Sudan is the perhaps the newest country on the African continent which has failed to put together a meaningful and effective administration and is embroiled in senseless ethnic war between government soldiers loyal to President Salva Kiir who hails from the largest ethnic group, the Dinka, and some rebel forces who are on the side of former vice president, Riek Machar, who is from the second largest ethnic group, the Nuer.

Perhaps this is the widely known picture of what South Sudan is all about. These are some of the popular perceptions that are being peddled by the international media. The discourse of ethnic induced civil war between the two ethnic groups greatly overshadows the greatest genocide that has killed more people than any other known genocide, the Holocaust included, the genesis of the civil war and most fundamentally the ultimate failure of the international community to stop and declare that genocide is taking place in South Sudan (Travis 2008). What is known about South Sudan today is that it is a humanitarian case and the common picture is that its problems can be reduced to ethnic factors and leadership personalities (Rolandsen 2015).

Although the country has been locked in a brutal ethnically based civil war since 2013, it resembles what may be classified as a fragile state where the government can no longer provide the basic needs of its people including ensuring food security and enforcing the rule of law resulting in efforts by the international community led by the United Nations to prevent more ethnic violence and provide food and medical aid to those in need (Travis 2008).

This failure to condemn and acknowledge the genocide in South Sudan greatly exposes Western hypocrisy and invalidates their claims as pioneers and defenders of crimes against humanity even in its worst form – genocide. The interplay of economic factors such as the rich oil resources in South Sudan greatly exposes the double standards that the United States of America, France, China, Russia and the United Nations (including the Security Council) exhibit when dealing with issues where they derive economic benefits (Reeves 2002; Travis 2008).

Again, the world, especially the level of the United Nations commitment to deal with genocide, is also brought into question especially in terms of manipulation by bigger forces to conveniently and deliberately failing to declare the situation in Sudan as a crime of genocide. What this also confirms is that racism and failure of consensus in the United Nations Security Council to declare genocide in South Sudan is driven by the fact that permanent members such as China, France, Russia are benefitting from the genocide in South Sudan. When the big powers benefit from genocidal activities they do not declare the situation to be a genocide and will deliberately define it as crimes against humanity or pay lip service under the guise of international humanitarian aid and interventions. The ahistorical nature of the story of

South Sudan has only helped to outplay the oil factor and the arming of militiamen dating from as far as 1989 through the People Defence Forces (PDF) to raid the South and commit genocide (Travis 2008; Reeves 2002; Patey 2007). Other contributing factors to the genocide such as the selling of weapons by the United States of America in the attempts to undermine the growing Soviet influence in Ethiopia and Libya (Travis 2010) are deliberately left out in the current discourse about the genocide. The instability in South Sudan is reduced to a spirited focus on the personal frailties of the leadership and how the South Sudan state is weak and failed to effectively maintain peace and provide basic necessities for the populace.

As Travis (2008) rightly notes, the genesis of genocide and creation of an environment of violence in Sudan is related to the discovery of oil in 1978 by Chevron in the South and the attempt by the Khartoum government to redraw the borders of the South to include the oil fields for the North. The oil factor has all but contributed more to the genocide as Reeves (2002: 166) notes:

Oil development in Sudan now sustains and exacerbates the longest and most destructive civil conflict in the world. More than two million human beings have perished Oil revenues presently stand as the greatest obstacle to a resolution of the conflict.

Thus, besides the fight over oil and tensions between South Sudan and Sudan, the current source of conflict has originated from the South Sudanese government itself especially after the December 2013 move by President Salva Kiir from the Dinka ethnic group to fire his deputy Riek Machar, a Nuer, the second largest ethnic group, on allegations of corruption. The ensuing violence resulted in the displacement of 413 000 civilians. The splitting of the army in half along ethnic lines has also encouraged militias and other non-government groups to rise (Travis 2008). The source and catalyst of the current conflict is the relatively large amounts of guns, missiles and gun based grenades and other explosives, readily available due to 40 years of civil war. As a result most citizens are well armed and this provides a fertile ground for ethnically based fights which are genocidal (Travis 2008, 2010; Reeves 2002).

South Sudan: A Brief History

South Sudan is Africa's newest nation born on the 9th of July 2011 in terms of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. This agreement ended decades of civil war and through the referendum of January 2011, South Sudan become a new state from Sudan after its citizens voted in favour of secession. South Sudan, a resource rich country is made up of 10 states and shares borders with six other African states namely; Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

With a population of about 8 million people composed of sixty tribes with the three dominant ones being Dinka, Nuer and Shiluk, South Sudan emerged from a difficult and brutal civil war with the then government of Sudan based in Khartoum which lasted for more than 20 years and killed close to 3 million people and displaced 5 million others (Reeves 2002). After getting independence from Sudan, South Sudan faced major challenges and a tribal war engulfed the country due to many unresolved differences which include border demarcations, wealth sharing and tensions with Sudan over oil revenues as the two countries depend on oil to fund their economic activities (Travis 2008).

In 2012, tension rose leading to the halting of production by South Sudan with accusations that Sudan was stealing oil shipments and Sudan retaliated by confiscating shipments as payments for transit fees. In South Sudan, tribal conflicts also emerged marked by widespread massacres and revenge killings and cattle raids in states such as Warrap, Unity and Jonglei and the killings took a genocidal character especially with the use of machine guns which the government of South Sudan has no capacity to prevent.

South Sudan faces numerous challenges from being the poorest and least developed country in the world ravaged by war and at times facing food emergency with UN estimates in 2011 that a third of the people of South Sudan faced endemic hunger and starvation. Genocide watchdogs, such as Genocide Watch and The Centre for the Prevention of Genocide (CPG) of the Holocaust Memorial Museum (2013), have noted that ethnic clashes in South Sudan, especially those that took place in Jonglei state, do constitute genocide emergency as they took the character of scorched-earth where entire villages and schools were burnt to the ground, several others killed and thousands being displaced.

The genocidal ethnic clashes in South Sudan have almost reduced the country to a charity case as civilian populations in South Sudan are under threat from violence and insecurity. The situation has prompted the need for proactive armed assistance to the South Sudan government in order to prevent the recurrence of ethnic massacres and engage in dialogue with ethnic groups such as Nuer, Murle, Dinka, Shilluk in terms of conflict resolution. While there are many aspects of South Sudan that can be looked into, this brief synopsis provides a cursory perspective of the challenges that South Sudan faces and the increasing propensity to genocide which is a result of more historical factors of war and violence and which cannot be reduced to ethnic clashes and failure of the present leaders only as the international media would want the world to make people believe. What the international media should question is why, despite more than two million people having been killed, the United Nations has not declared the killings in then Sudan, South Sudan and Darfur as genocide?

International Failure to Stop Genocide in South Sudan

Both the United Nations and the United States of America government stand accused of failing to prevent genocide in South Sudan by ignoring the pleas of assistance especially in the region of Yei where President Kiir forces were accused of burning villages and slaughtering men, women and children. This has been described as ethnic cleansing which created the largest exodus of civilians in Africa since the 1994 Rwandan Genocide as one million people fled the region to Uganda with estimated hundreds of thousands dying in South Sudan. In fact, the genocide in South Sudan was comparable to that of Rwanda where at least one million people were killed in 100 days according to the African Centre for Strategic Studies at the U.S Defense Department. Kate Almquist Knopf noted that:

The reality is that Rwanda happened while UN was there, while the international community was there, and they didn't do anything. The same thing is happening now in South Sudan It's happening on Africa's watch. It's happening on America's watch. It's happening on the United Nations watch. It's happening on everyone's watch.

The sentiments expressed in the above quote questions the role of the relevant countries and organisations especially their sincerity in dealing with issues to do with genocide on the African continent. The failure smacks of racism as the so called defenders or global watchdogs choose to fold their hands when Africans are being massacred just because they are benefitting. It seems that if the powers that be are benefitting they care less about the atrocities. Again, the shortcomings of Africa are exposed in that it lacks organisational ability to deal with issues of genocide and leaves everything to the international community as was the case with Rwanda. What is important to note is the fact that, whether the UN defines an act as genocide or not, it does not mean that the act is not genocidal if the case of South Sudan is to be carefully looked at where more people were killed and displaced than in any other declared genocide, even the Holocaust (Travis 2008).

Is South Sudan a Purely Ethnic Conflict?

As alluded to earlier, popular perceptions about South Sudan is that there is senseless violence and that the conflict has developed into what may be termed genocidal violence which has killed thousands, displaced millions and created endemic hunger and starvation. It is a fact that both warring factions in South Sudan have committed genocide but the perception that the South Sudan violence is mainly ethnic greatly obscures the complex nature of the conflict. The conflict in South Sudan is centred on power struggles on money, corruption and access to natural resources (Reeves 2002). The roots of the

current ethnic tensions can be traced back to the Second Sudanese Civil war and the resultant tension in the South Sudanese ethnic communities and their fights over fertile land and oil, the conflict has resulted mainly from oil since the country has huge oil reserves (Travis 2010).

What has appeared to the world is that the South Sudanese conflict is a simple matter of an ethnic fight between the Dinka and the Nuer represented by Kiir and Machar which has been blown out of proportion including reports of massive corruption by the new government. The genocide of South Sudan is treated in an ahistorical manner as a consequence of misrule, but this line of thinking ignores the actions and ethnic cleansing of the Holy Wars declared by the government of Sudan in 1992, especially against the Nuba, which were characterised by wholesale murder, abduction, rape family separation, forced religious conversion and forced relocations of thousands of Nuba (Travis 2008). The regime of Omar Hasan al Bashir and its allied militias systematically killed thousands of people and committed widespread rape, and burned hundreds of thousand villages although it had not exterminated the whole population that fled. The focus on the ethnic factor is meant to conceal the role of dynamic regional and international actors, including China, Uganda, Sudan and the United States, and the oil fields in South Sudan (ibid 2008).

The oil factor is also paramount in the genocide as the non-Arab groups were displaced to allow for oil exploration. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights also noted, long term efforts by the various governments of Sudan to protect oil production included a policy of forcible population displacement in order to clear oil production areas and transportation routes of Southern civilians. This led to a major displacement of civilian populations related to oil extraction, with the bomber aircraft and helicopter gunships that attacked Southern Sudanese villages taking off from an airstrip within the Talisman energy oil concession (Reeves 2002; Travis 2008). Genocide was also accelerated by the discovery of oil in Sudan and the lucrative contracts between the regime of Omar Hassan al Bashir and the international oil interests, including the China National Petroleum Company (CNPC), Petronas and Talisman Energy.

Oil also enabled the Sudanese government to import weapons that would make it easy to end human life and thus became a curse as China and Saudi Arabia exported weapons in violation of UN arms embargo. China helped in the setting up of factories to manufacture arms and its companies exported arms and ammunition worth \$24 million to Sudan in 2005 as well as aircraft parts and equipment worth \$57 million and helicopter and airplane parts worth \$2 million (Travis 2008), thereby contributing to instability and genocide.

What may struck observers is the role of China in the conflict. China has vested interests in South Sudan as a major consumer of up to 80% of the exports from South Sudan. In fact, China has of late been more interested in Africa presenting itself as an all-weather friend but the reality is that it is

mainly driven by the need to secure energy resources (Alden 2005). The interest that China has in South Sudan oil has seen the country being flooded by weapons from that country and Russia (Reeves 2002; Travis 2008).

One aspect that also need to be noted is that China and Russia are the countries that pretend to block any sanctions on African countries in terms of human rights in the United Nations Security Council yet the reality is that these countries are the chief beneficiaries of these atrocities. It is sad that China up to 2014 sold weapon worth US\$ 20 million, which ended up in the hands of rebels and contributed to the genocide (Travis 2008). The flow of Chinese weapons has greatly contributed to the genocide in South Sudan.

Also culpable in the genocide is the United States of America which, despite investing billions in the development of South Sudan, failed to implement a meaningful strategy to deal with the genocide. Far from being an ethnic conflict, the genocide in South Sudan has a lot to do with oil and greed. What is puzzling about the situation in South Sudan is that, while the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, did acknowledge in March 2017 that the situation needed special attention as armed actors were committing gang rape and other human rights violations such as arbitrary arrests and forced displacement, still the UN only described the situation as ethnic cleansing which could end up being a genocide.

This failure to describe the situation as genocide represents the worst deception and possible manipulation of the United Nations System especially from a human rights perspective and confirms the widespread fears that African lives do not really matter in the international community. The inaction of the world powers can also be interpreted as the continuation of heinous atrocities that marked the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade era.

The introduction of arms in the south before the independence of South Sudan complicated the nature of the fights as previously the Dinka and Nuer had clashes over grazing land and water for their cattle but without major fatalities. The international community led by Russia and China in 2017 also opposed an arms embargo and additional sanctions on South Sudan simply because they are the chief beneficiaries in terms of arms trade and oil extraction.

Far from looking at the root causes and the world inaction over the genocide, the media agenda shifted international opinion to blame the South Sudanese government for using oil resources to fund militias which has resulted in atrocities and attacks on civilians and the portrayal of the conflict as only being ethnically charged and pitting forces loyal to Kiir, a Dinka and rebels linked to Machar a Neur. What is missing from most analyses of this simplistic conclusion is the fact that what happens in South Sudan today is a result of the 22 year civil war between the Sudanese government and the people of South Sudan in which Sudanese forces not only attacked the South but manipulated tribal tensions which has created the instability that is witnessed today (Travis 2008, 2010).

A Case for Genocide in South Sudan

The denial by the United Nations and world powers, especially those in the Security Council, especially China and Russia, that genocide took place in the then Sudan, South Sudan and Darfur, does not rule out that the crime of genocide was committed.

Article II of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (adopted in December 1948) defines genocide as any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnical, racial or religious group: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily harm or mental harm to the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in the whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Although the UN definition has been widely accepted, there is recognition that genocide takes many forms and has been defined in diverse ways (Rummel 2004; Campbell 2009; Adhikari 2010). The developmental challenges in South Sudan due to the violence constitute another form of genocide outside the context of the UN definition. Nothing can be further than genocidal for a country which is at the bottom of the Human Development Index as 90% of the population is illiterate, 75% has no access to health services and 30% no access to clean drinking water. These statistics, if viewed from the definition of genocide as an act of violent purposes to destroy a particular group, and the fact that the number of people killed are less relevant than intent itself, and the ultimate outcome a permanent drop in population, and irreparable damage to the institutions and way of life of that particular group (Adhikari 2011), the situation in South Sudan constitute a crime of genocide.

The current situation in South Sudan, which is a result of decades of war and oil extraction, means that the lives of these people have been permanently changed and all they know is violence and war. Thus, there are generations that have not known anything except violence and failure to locate this crisis in the nexus between oil extraction and illicit arms trade by Russia and China. Thus, laying the blame for genocide squarely on the incompetence of the new government in South Sudan can only perpetuate and serve to mask the extent of genocide. Again, the manipulation of the United Nations to ignore declaring that genocide has taken place also prevents any form of a comprehensive intervention to stop this genocide.

The genocide in Sudan can also be seen as part of an economic policy by means of mass murder and in more explicit terms according to Travis's (2008: 01) definition of genocide as "the outcome of acts designed to enrich a dominant racial, ethnic, religious or political group at the expense of smaller,

weaker, or supposedly ‘inferior’ groups that possess valuable monies, labour, or other resources”.

The situation in Sudan best demonstrates genocide since the Sudan military and the allied militia killed and wounded members of identifiable non-Arab groups by means of repeated and large scale destructive and discriminatory acts as outlined in the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Travis 2008). Also, the allies who profit from oil in Sudan failed to be a factor in the prevention of the genocide. Sudan used proceeds from oil to purchase international arms, including technologies that are designed to end life on a mass scale, leading to the massacre of 2.5 million indigenous African people and destruction of thousands of villages and towns. The oil companies thus also played a pivotal role in arming the genocidal regime and helped to perpetuate an apathetic international response (ibid 2008).

Several powerful United Nations members are also culpable of doing nothing to stop the genocide because they have an interest in the flow of oil from Sudan and the back flow of weapons. Furthermore, the United Nations Security Council failed to recognise or condemn the genocide in South and Central Sudan which spread since 2003 to Darfur and Eastern Chad (Reeves 2002; Travis 2008, 2010). This naturally condemns the people of South Sudan to death because oil is found in their land.

As Travis (2008) argues, the international community has justified its refusal to act effectively against genocide in Sudan by distorting inter-national law in terms of the report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur which was submitted to the United Nations Secretary General in 2005. The report concluded, contrary to the weight of precedent, that genocide has not occurred in Darfur by arguing that although government and militias had systematically killed thousands of people, committed widespread rape, and murder, it had not “exterminated the whole population that had not fled” (Travis 2008: 3). Such denials also apply to the situation in South Sudan.

This denial of genocide flies in the face of the general principles that informed the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide used by Raphael Lemkin in drafting the convention. Lemkin used the term genocide to mean attempted extermination of national, racial or religious groups. The Lemkin definition does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of life of national groups with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objective of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions of culture, language, national feelings, religion and the economic existence of national groups (ibid 2008). With respect to South Sudan it seems such a deliberate action to commit genocide started before it achieved its independence as the Arab North waged a campaign war

of genocide against what they described as “infidels” of Darfur and South Sudan and as the Janjaweed militias systematically killed members of non-Arab groups by “burning, shelling and bombing them” (ibid 2008: 19).

By as early as 2002, the President and Congress of the United States of America concluded that actions of the Sudanese government in the South constituted genocide under the Genocide Convention, but then United Nations Secretary general, Kofi Annan, in 2004 refused to describe the situation as either ethnic cleansing or genocide. The denial by the UN that genocide took place in Sudan completely disregards a key principle that the crime of genocide requires neither the complete destruction of a group nor intent to annihilate a group completely to qualify as genocidal intent. This principle applies to the role of the Sudanese Army and the Janjaweed allies as they killed a considerable number of individuals of specific ethnic and tribal groups and they did have the intention to kill and they also interfered with food relief aid to victims (ibid 2008: 35).

Conclusion

The commitment to end genocide on the African continent is not evident from the international community and the situation in South Sudan, which has been ignored since before the creation of this new state, continues even up to this very day due to the benefits derived by those who could possibly end it. The focus and analyses of the genocide has been reduced to mainly ethnicity and lack of leadership abilities on the part of South Sudan. This view has been conveniently picked by the international media to portray the genocide and violence in South Sudan as ethnic-based while deliberately ignoring the role played by the superpowers such as China, Russia, France and The United States of America in contributing to the general atmosphere of insecurity and increasing the propensity of violence and including failure to declare that crimes of genocide are being committed in then Sudan and South Sudan and Darfur. The current narratives are unhelpful and condemns the people of Africa and South Sudan in particular to more violence and genocide as the world continues to ignore it.

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