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By Nicholas D. Kristof
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(...) In the 1980s and 1990s, it was [in South Darfur] that the government perfected the techniques that later became notorious in Darfur: mass rape and murder by armed militias, so as to terrorize civilians and drive them away. Now Sudan is coming full circle, apparently preparing to apply the same techniques again to Abyei and parts of the south.

(...) With international attention distracted by Darfur and the United States presidential race, the Sudanese government now is chipping away at the 2005 peace treaty that ended the north-south war in Sudan. If war erupts, as many expect, the flash point will probably be (...) Abyei [a little town on the edge of southern Sudan], where the northern government is pumping oil from wells it refuses to give up.

(...) Since late November, there have been repeated clashes in the Abyei area between South Sudan's armed forces and a large tribe of Arab nomads, the Misseriya, which is armed and backed by the Sudanese government in Khartoum. Mr. Paguot [acting government administrator in the Abyei region,] said that several hundred people had been killed in these clashes (...).

(...) A group of Misseriya has appointed officials to create their own government for Abyei and has threatened to march in with thousands of armed men to install it. This is almost exactly the same approach that President Omar al-Bashir has taken in Darfur: arm the janjaweed and unleash them on a black African population, then dismiss the slaughter as just tribal fighting. Mr. Paguot said that 16,000 militia members were gathered on the north side of Abyei, backed by a few tanks and many pickup trucks with mounted machine guns, ready to invade. They aren't called the janjaweed, but it's the same idea.

Some local officials and Misseriya elders have worked heroically to avert violence, but state-controlled newspapers in Khartoum are carrying false reports of attacks on Arabs, inflaming tensions.

(...) The [2005 peace agreement that ended 20 years of war between North and South Sudan] came about because of tireless diplomacy by the Bush administration, but since then Washington has dropped the ball. It is still possible to avert a new slaughter here, but only if there is a major international effort involving the United Nations, Egypt, China and Europe as well as the United States to ensure that the peace agreement is followed and that President Bashir will pay a price for attacking the south.

A crucial step would be for China to suspend transfers of arms to Sudan until the Khartoum government works for peace with the south and in Darfur. Unfortunately, China refuses to take that step. (...)

Full text and video available at:

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/opinion/02kristof.html?_r=1&oref=login