

AS PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH sat down at a joint press conference with South African President Thabo Mbeki on June 1, he preempted a question about the crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan

"This is a serious situation," Bush said. Then he made a statement that would effectively end a dispute within his administration over the true nature of the war crimes in Darfur. "As you know, former Secretary of State Colin Powell, with my concurrence, declared the situation a genocide. Our government has put a lot of money to help deal with the human suffering there."

His latter point is beyond dispute. The United States gives a substantial portion of the world's humanitarian assistance to the roughly 150 camps for the internally displaced that dot Sudan's western region. But where a government has recognized genocide, dictates of treaty law require an effort to punish and prevent war crimes -- and that's an effort the Bush administration has yet to undertake.

"Declaring Darfur a genocide every six months or so leaves the administration open to criticisms that they are politicizing the use of the term," says John Prendergast of the respected nongovernmental organization the International Crisis Group. "The genocide declarations appear less demonstrative of policy and more of a political ploy to be seen as being tough on the [Sudanese] regime."

...And if the current trajectory of the Bush administration's Sudan policy is sustained, there's the likelihood of a new era of constructive engagement with Khartoum -- pursued in the name of fighting the war on terrorism -- after the Sudanese government undergoes a constitutional restructuring in July

As the crisis began to threaten regional stability, the highest levels at the State Department began to take serious notice. "There was a lot of discussion of Darfur at State, and there was the feeling that the U.S. could not just stand by if another genocide was occurring," says Stephanie Frease of the Washington-based NGO Coalition for International Justice.

The ambassador-at-large for war-crimes issues and the assistant secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor called on Frease and other NGO representatives to devise a survey tool that would help establish the scope of the atrocities in Darfur

The survey soon made its way to Powell's desk. Shortly thereafter, he unambiguously told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee of the survey's finding, saying, "We concluded that genocide has been committed in Darfur and that the government of Sudan and the Janjaweed bear responsibility, and genocide may still be occurring."

POWELL'S STATEMENT CONSTITUTED a momentous occasion for Sudan activists. But while the statement may have temporarily satisfied these activists -- a large number of whom, incidentally, are evangelical Christians, which may help explain why Powell made it seven weeks before the election -- no policy shift accompanied the declaration.

Bush's defenders would note here that he inherited a policy of constructive engagement from the Clinton administration. That's true. However, the later Clinton administration was willing to engage Khartoum precisely because its tough approach in prior years paid some dividends.

"The last time we really went after these guys was in 1996-97," says Prendergast, who served on the National Security Council (NSC) at the time. "We imposed targeted sanctions on the regime, and they immediately booted [Osama] bin Laden [who had found haven in Sudan from 1992-96] and dismantled his terrorist infrastructure." During that time, the ruling National Islamic Front was never an exemplar of human rights, but it had not yet started a genocide.

Since then, the Bush administration's reluctance to take the regime to task can partly be explained by the intimate liaison forged between the CIA and Sudan's intelligence services

since September 11

"Right now, we are back in this Cold War mentality where we say, 'What they do in their country is their business as long as they are supporting our war on terror,'" laments Representative Donald Payne, a New Jersey Democrat who serves as the ranking member on the House Subcommittee on Africa

But intelligence cooperation is not the only reason the administration treats Khartoum with kid gloves. The other is internal to the State Department, where Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick has served as the administration's point man on Sudan since Powell left. To say the least, he's been less than aggressive with Khartoum.

in January, under American leadership, the warring parties in Sudan's 20-year civil war signed a historic peace agreement in Nairobi, Kenya. The new peace accord between the south Sudan rebels and Khartoum to the north has led to the hope that its implementation can spread peace across the entire country. Khartoum is poised to enter into a power-sharing arrangement with the leader of the southern rebels, John Garang, who is set to assume a vice president's post and form a national unity government with his former adversaries in July.

While the north-south accord was momentous, it's arguably come at the price of innocent lives in Darfur. "The singular task was to get the peace deal done," said a government official familiar with the formation of Sudan policy at the time. "Some State Department officials key on Sudan matters were slow to engage on Darfur because it would goof up the north-south negotiations.

"The genocide in Darfur can be seen as the fulfillment of Khartoum's ability to use the north-south agreement to their advantage," says Eric Reeves, a Smith College professor who's become one of the most prescient observers of Sudan over the last half-decade

WHEN GARANG ENTERS KHARTOUM in July, the State Department is likely to portray the formation of the national unity government as a volcanic event. It comes only as the result of a large expenditure of State Department resources, both financial and moral, and ushers in the end of a war that spanned two decades.

But despite the government's new look, Khartoum will not exactly be overrun with fresh faces come July. Garang aside, the same people who orchestrated the genocide in Darfur will remain in power. And this will put the administration in the most awkward of diplomatic spots. As Ted Dagne, a Sudan researcher for the Congressional Research Service, aptly asks, "Will the Bush administration continue to invest in the success of an entity that it helped create, but which includes some of those who have carried out what the president himself has deemed a genocide?"

Given the low priority to which the administration holds the punishment and prevention of the genocide in Darfur, it would appear so.

<http://www.sudaneseonline.com/earticle2005/jun24-57740.shtml>