

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By Michael Loeb



IA-Forum talks with Professor David Shinn of George Washington University. Professor Shinn is a former Ambassador of Ethiopia and Burkina Faso and worked in the State Department. Professor Shinn's research includes Islamic Fundamentalism, East Africa, HIV/AIDS, U.S. foreign policy in Africa, and terrorism. Below is the conversation IAF had with Professor Shinn about the crimes against humanity in Darfur, Sudan.

International Affairs Forum: Do you see the genocide in Sudan getting better or worse right now?

Professor David Shinn: "First, one has to be a little bit careful with using the term genocide. ... That is the position of the United States, that is the position of a number of human rights organizations. It is not the position of the European Union, it is not the position of the United Nations, and it is not the position of the African Union, and it certainly isn't the position of the government of Sudan.

"The United Nations has indicated very clearly that they're crimes against humanity. ... In terms of the technical issue as to whether it is or is not a genocide, that's not agreed upon at all.

"It has become enormously complicated in the last several months because of the situation in Chad. You have an upcoming election in Chad with the current president, Idriss Deby, running for reelection – he's not in good health. ... There are all kinds of machinations going on in his effort to retain power in Chad, which are contributing to new violence that is going across the Chad-Sudan border.

"The situation is clearly bad, and because of what is happening across the Chad-Sudan border, that aspect of it is worse. But the overall situation may not be worse than it was six, eight months ago."

IAF: To what degree have the Sudanese been able to flee to Chad?

Shinn: "Most of the people who are in distress are actually what they call internally displaced persons, or IDPs, inside Sudan. In other words, they have been forced out of their homes in Darfur and they have moved to some other central location, either an IDP camp or a town for protection and food.

“A couple of hundred thousand at minimum have gone into Chad also, but the larger numbers are actually IDPs in Darfur itself. But as I mentioned earlier, this Chadian issue is complicated and my understanding is you now have some Chadians who have fled into Darfur.”

IAF: Do you see a solution that the United States or the U.N. has overlooked?

Shinn: “The bigger problem is one of having a force on the ground in Darfur that can maintain adequate security. Right now, the African Union has about 7,000 troops. They have a very weak mandate; they’re not able to carry out military operations. They don’t really have the capacity to do that anyway; they’re there more as monitors of the situation. And I think most people agree that’s an inadequate force for ending the conflict in Darfur.

“Many people, including the United States, are proposing that the African Union operation be replaced by a U.N. peacekeeping operation with a Chapter Seven mandate, which means you can use force, if it’s necessary. ... The African Union says that it prefers to remain in charge for the next [five] months. ... Sudan government has said, ‘No, we don’t want the U.N. peacekeeping force in here.’ ”

IAF: Would the U.N. be better at reducing the number of crimes against humanity in Darfur than the African Union?

Shinn: “The Sudan government will argue that whatever is happening that’s bad out there now is happening by groups that are not totally under its control, like the Janjaweed.

“Until you get on the ground a force that is capable of dealing with groups like the Janjaweed, that have the firepower and the mobility and the communications, they are probably going to continue what they’re doing, whether they’re doing it on their own, or whether they’re doing it at the behest of the Sudan government.

“They key, in my view, is to have a more robust, probably U.N. force on the ground and that means that you’ve some how or another ... you’ve got to convince the Sudan government that that’s the right thing to do, or if they are unwilling to accept that, then the U.N. makes the decision on its own and basically overrides what the government says ... but that has its downsides too. ... Ideally, you want to go in with a concurrence with the Sudan government because it will just make the job easier.

“Then the issue becomes what do you go in with or who do you go in with? ... In theory, you would continue to use the 7,000 African troops that are there and put them under the U.N. flag, but that’s not enough, so you’ve got to come up with more troops. Where do they come from? There are some people in the United States who are saying make it a NATO operation, use troops from Western Europe and the U.S. My own view is that that would be a huge mistake. The idea of sending white,

Christian troops into Muslim, Arab Darfur; I won't make the parallels, I'll let you make them.

"What NATO can do, what the U.S. can do, what Western Europe can do is provide the logistical backup for this, the ferrying of troops, wherever they have to come [from]. It can provide maybe some headquarters support, maybe communications support, maybe intelligence support. But, boots on the ground, doesn't make any sense in my mind.

"To look at troop providing countries, I would start first in a couple of the North African countries like Tunisia and Morocco. They're Arab, they speak Arabic. They're Muslim. They're from the same sort of general region. Probably have a somewhat better understanding of the culture, although it's different in Darfur.

"I'd look at troops from Muslim countries, like maybe Pakistan, Malaysia, Bangladesh. Might even look at India."

IAF: What will happen in Darfur?

Shinn: "Nothing apparently is going to happen for the next five months or so. ... The AU said it would not even consider handing off the operation to the U.N. until six months out. About a month has gone by, so it's roughly five months away.

"The next big question is, 'What's the position of the government of Sudan?' As of the moment, they continue to forcefully object to a U.N. operation. But what I think what you have to do is have quiet talks with Sudan, not public discussion, and say 'Look, this is a proposal we have for ending the dilemma in Darfur, and we would hope that you'd go along with it.'

"Lay out a proposal for using predominantly Muslim troops from North Africa, from other parts of South Asia, maybe Southeast Asia, and see if that would be more acceptable to them. Because in the ideal world, you'd like to have them agreeing to this. Just the idea of logistically supporting a peacekeeping operation like this, literally in the center of Africa, is mind boggling. There's no port within thousands of miles of Darfur."

IAF: Is this situation worse than the Apartheid in South Africa?

Shinn: "I don't think you can compare them, they're really so different. ... If I were to compare it to anything ... this is really not a good comparison, a lot of people are comparing it with Rwanda, but that also has many flaws in it. And the situation in Rwanda was far worse, in any event."

IAF: What are some of the other critical factors in the situation in Darfur?

Shinn: "The one major point I guess that I would make, is that the problem in Darfur today has antecedents that go back decades. This is

not as though this is the first time there's been a problem in Darfur. It's been a marginalized part of Sudan throughout the history of Sudan, together with certain other parts of Sudan, like the South, where there was a civil war that raged from 1955 until 1972 and then it stopped and then it resumed again in 1983 and then there was a ceasefire about three years ago.

"The eastern part of Sudan is marginalized. And that's one of the core reasons why you have this unhappiness in Darfur, when you combine with that their feeling of being sort of left out of the economic and power structure of Sudan. Plus the tensions over competition for very scarce resources, like pasturage and water, which creates localized problems that are very serious. Plus the existence of large quantities of small arms in the area, so that if someone wants to carry out some sort of attack or create problems, it's very easy to do so. ... It makes for a very volatile situation.

"The people in Darfur saw the Southerners making progress through the use of force, vis-à-vis the government in Khartoum, and they're sitting out in Darfur saying, 'We're not getting anything out of this. We're not even part of that agreement. It's only between Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. I guess the only way to get anything is to take up arms and to do something about it.' My guess is that's exactly what instigated them to take up arms at this point in time."

IAF: In what way did these civil wars spark the current situation in Darfur?

Shinn: "It was not so much the civil war itself that sparked the situation in Darfur as it was the agreement to end the civil war. And the way you ended the civil war was to offer the South something that it didn't have before.

"The Darfurians said, 'Look, [the Southerners have] managed to get something real out of this. They've gotten more political power. They've gotten control over almost 50 percent of the oil revenue. What do we get out of this? We get nothing, because we're not part of it.'

"And then they put two and two together and said, 'The reason they got that is that they had conducted this war against Khartoum. ... We [want] not necessarily what the South has, but we want something. We want more than we've got.'"

IAF: Thank you for your time.

Comments? Please send them to editor@ia-forum.org

