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Mass Slaughter and Obama's Mystifying Indifference

In 2007, as a presidential candidate, Barack Obama said ignoring Darfur would be 'a stain on our souls.' Now: nothing.

BY MIA FARROW AND DANIEL JONAH GOLDHAGEN

When President Obama addressed the United Nations General Assembly this week, the speech ran to more than 5,000 words, most of them focused on turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa. Yet the president never mentioned the continuing genocide conducted in several parts of Sudan by President Omar al-Bashir.

There was a time when Mr. Obama expressed outrage over the mass murder and aerial bombardment of civilians in the Darfur region of western Sudan. In 2007, the then-presidential hopeful said the Western world's silence regarding the slaughter in Sudan would leave "a stain on our souls."

Now President Obama has joined that silence. These days, to learn about what is transpiring in Sudan, one must turn to Radio Dabanga, broadcasting from the Netherlands. A recent report described the bombardment of a Darfur village called Abu Tega, which was "completely burned and the population fled in all directions."

President Obama's critics have denounced his foreign-policy choices, which they believe have weakened the global credibility of the U.S. But Mr. Obama has managed to avoid scrutiny about his most tragic foreign-policy failure: standing by as Sudan's Islamic regime perpetrates a slaughter against its own citizens who belong to non-Arab ethnic groups. Bashir continues a 10-year annihilation, slaughtering many tens of

thousands, and very likely more.



Reuters

Displaced people wait at a food distribution center in Darfur, June 2013.

Previous American presidents have betrayed a similar callous disregard for

the taking of human life. Most notably Bill Clinton, who did nothing to stop genocidal assaults in Rwanda, where the Hutus slaughtered 800,000 Tutsis in 1994. Mr. Clinton has come to see this inaction as his most historic dereliction of duty. He has since admitted that the international community was complicit in mass murder abroad when the U.S. could have acted to save a few hundred thousand lives.

"We did not act quickly enough after the killing began," Mr. Clinton said on a reconciliation tour in Rwanda in 1998. "We did not immediately call these crimes by their rightful name: genocide. . . . We owe to all the people in the world our best efforts to organize ourselves so that we can maximize the chances of preventing these events."

Mr. Clinton's regrets offer a cautionary tale. President Obama and his current National Security Advisor Susan Rice would agree—or at least they did when in 2007, they separately condemned the Bush administration for its inaction in Sudan, specifically citing the Clinton administration's failure in Rwanda. Both proclaimed that the U.S. should never again fail to intervene when innocents are being slaughtered.

Mr. Obama has cited humanitarian reasons to intervene in a crisis when politically convenient. He entered Libya "to prevent a bloodbath," despite no mass slaughter of civilians in that country. This disingenuous explanation only damaged his credibility as a humanitarian, though it did placate the international human-rights community.

So why does Sudan not deserve the same consideration? An enormous number of civilian lives are at risk in Darfur. Bashir's assaults against the people of Sudan have escalated in intensity. Some three million people are living—if you can even call it that—in refugee camps under wretched conditions. They lack food, water, sanitation and basic medical attention. Hundreds of thousands of children are growing up malnourished with stunted growth and damaged cognitive abilities. If they survive, they are left without an education to a lifetime of suffering, with many likely to eventually succumb to disease.

And the camps are hardly safe. Bashir's henchmen continue to attack them, and torch villages and fields, indiscriminately murdering, raping and pillaging defenseless people every day. Still more Darfuris die from disease and starvation at alarming rates, with the dead no longer even counted.

The world is unaware of the carnage because the region is closed to the international community and media. Even many key U.N. and humanitarian personnel have been expelled recently.

There is a moral imperative to help the people of Darfur, which President Obama once articulated well. In 2007 he said, "Today we know what is right, and today we know what is wrong. The slaughter of innocents is wrong. Two million people driven from their homes is wrong. Women gang raped while gathering firewood is wrong. And silence, acquiescence and paralysis in the face of genocide is wrong." He made his solution clear: "We've got to have a protective force on the ground."

Yet those suffering in Darfur can expect no such "protective force" from the U.S. For reasons that are unclear, Sudan doesn't meet Mr. Obama's threshold for action. His words at the U.N., including generic rhetoric "that it is in our interest to see a Middle East and North Africa that is peaceful and prosperous," offer little hope if any. Mr. Obama has abandoned his own moral standards and left the people of Darfur to perish.

—Ms. Farrow, an activist and actor, is filming "The Darfur Archives," documenting the cultural traditions of the Darfur tribes targeted for elimination. Mr. Goldhagen is the author, most recently, of "The Devil That Never Dies: The Rise and Threat of Global Antisemitism" (Little, Brown, 2013).