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From Darfur to Gaza: Taking the Responsibility to Prevent Genocide Seriously

BY LUTZ OETTE ([HTTPS://AFRICANARGUMENTS.ORG/AUTHOR/LUTZ-OETTE/](https://africanarguments.org/author/lutz-oette/)) / © JUNE 18, 2024 / 0

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Protest raging in Sudan after the 2018 revolution. Credit: The Times

A genocide is looming, yet again, in Darfur, West Sudan. The Rapid Support Forces are besieging El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, which is currently under the control of the Sudanese Armed Forces. Hundreds of thousands of non-Arab ethnic groups have sought shelter in the city. The estimated 800,000 civilians (<https://press.un.org/en/2024/db240524.doc.htm>), if not millions of people (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/17/hell-on-earth-as-violence-escalates-in-sudans-el-fasher>) in El Fasher and its vicinity, are already facing a dire humanitarian situation, including emergency levels of hunger (<https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-warns-time-running-out-prevent-starvation-darfur-violence-el-fasher-escalates>), including starvation (<https://www.thedial.world/state-of-the-world/gaza-famine-international-law>). Besides the risk of civilian bloodshed with catastrophic consequences (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/may/12/fighting-besieged-sudanese-city-el-fasher-rsf-darfur>), El Fasher may fall into the hands of the Rapid Support Forces and allied Arab tribes sooner rather than later. If it does, its residents belonging to non-Arab ethnic groups, particularly the Masalit, the Fur and the Zaghawa, will be at the mercy of the very people who were responsible for a genocide in El Geneina (<https://raoulwallenbergcentre.org/images/reports/International-Inquiry->

Breaches-of-the-Genocide-Convention-temp2.pdf) in the West of Darfur last year, and, as the notorious Janjaweed (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/05/09/massalit-will-not-come-home/ethnic-cleansing-and-crimes-against-humanity-el>), for the Darfur genocide in the mid-2000s. A long list of remarks (<https://raoulwallenbergcentre.org/images/reports/International-Inquiry-Breaches-of-the-Genocide-Convention-temp2.pdf>) calling the Masalit “slaves”, shouting to kill all of them before murdering several of them, and raping Masalit women so that “they can give birth to our babies” leave little doubt about prevalent genocidal intentions. Translate »

Preventing genocide in Darfur

The risk of genocide in Darfur should mobilise the United Nations and states to do their utmost to protect the people whose killing is foretold. The Genocide Convention (https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20adopted%20in%201948) adopted in 1948 became the first international human rights treaty after the Second World War. In the shadow of the Holocaust, it left no doubt that all states have a duty to prevent genocide. It did so for good reason. Genocide is a monstrous crime because one people, typically, arrogate themselves the right to annihilate another people and thereby decide the fate of their existence. Raphael Lemkin coined the term genocide. He described it, in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* published in 1944, as a “synchronised attack on different aspects of life of the captive peoples”, namely in the political, social, cultural, economic, biological, physical existence, religious and moral field. Genocide is not only aimed at destroying the members of the group it attacks. It also destroys, and seeks to destroy, the group’s history and culture. By so doing, genocide attacks a member of the human family, and our common humanity. This is what is at stake in Darfur now. As are centuries of, albeit at times fraught, co-existence of multiple groups in a unique part of Sudan.

How has the world reacted to an increasing number of reports raising the alarm? The UN Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, had issued repeated warnings of the risk of genocide in Darfur, most recently on 15 April 2024 (https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/USG_Nderitu_Sudan_one%20year_15042924.pdf) and in a briefing before the UN Security Council on 22 May 2024. In the briefing, she reportedly stated (<https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/genocide-advisor-briefs-un-security-council-on-genocide-in-sudan>) that the situation “bears all the marks of risk of genocide.” Ongoing attacks “bear signs of not having military objectives and meaning to cause displacement and fear”, being “characterized by indiscriminate violence.” Nderitu highlights the increased risk of “racially motivated attacks and killings.” The UN Security Council (<https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15728.doc.htm>) and the AU Peace and Security Council (<https://papsrepository.africa-union.org/handle/123456789/2076>) have expressed concern and called for a ceasefire, but no concerted action has been taken. The mandate of

the only potential protection force on the ground, the United Nations – African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID (<https://unamid.unmissions.org/>)) had ended in December 2020. The United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS (<https://unitams.unmissions.org/en>)), established in mid-2020, was unable to prevent the deteriorating rights and security situation before its mandate ended in December 2023.

An Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffm-sudan/index>) established by the UN Human Rights Council is due to report in September/October, which may already be too late to have any effect on ongoing violations. The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (<https://www.icc-cpi.int/darfur>) is investigating ongoing international crimes which he believes are “being committed in Darfur” (<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-karim-khan-kc-united-nations-security-council-situation-darfur-1>) by both sides. However, he has not yet applied for the issuance of new arrest warrants. States have been slow to take any action on the current armed conflict. Their mistaken faith in “men with guns” and the collective failure of international and regional actors (<https://africanarguments.org/2024/05/sudan-the-violence-is-a-symptom-of-a-profound-collective-failure/>) undermined democratic efforts in Sudan prior to the war, scuppering the transitional period which was ended by a military coup in October 2021. Giving licence to regional Arab states, such as the United Arab Emirates, who pursue their own interests, rather than that of the Sudanese people, has not helped to stem the violence believed to be fuelling the fires. A much firmer stance and concerted action to step up protection (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/05/09/massalit-will-not-come-home/ethnic-cleansing-and-crimes-against-humanity-el>) and raise the personal costs for those responsible for serious violations in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan is therefore urgently needed (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/research-event/spotlight-darfur-implications-ongoing-conflict-and-atrocities>).

Responding to the Darfur genocide in the shadow of Gaza

The lack of public and political mobilisation on the looming genocide in Darfur sharply contrasts with US engagement in 2004, when the then Secretary of State Colin Powell (<https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/36042.htm>) called what was happening in the region a genocide, however hegemonic this position was. Today, developments in Darfur are taking place against the backdrop of the war on Gaza. Israel’s conduct in this war is increasingly viewed, from the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5573-report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-palestinian>) to scholars such as Nimer Sultany (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14623528.2024.2351261>) or Aryeh Neier (<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2024/06/06/is-israel-committing-genocide-aryeh-neier/>), as

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amounting to genocide. It has become the focus of worldwide mobilisations and judicial interventions by states, particularly in the case brought by South Africa against Israel before the International Court of Justice (<https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192>). This development has left the USA and several other Western states in an awkward position. Their denial that Israel could possibly commit genocide leaves them open to charges of hypocritical double standards and the selective invocation of genocide when it suits their political interests. Such stance is not new, but it has never been as starkly exposed. It fits within a larger pattern of imperialism and colonialism in which “civilised”

(<https://www.theguardian.com/law/article/2024/may/23/icc-arrest-warrants-would-be-an-anti-colonial-step>) states such as Israel can do no wrong and the victims are treated as less than human. Their wrongdoing? In the case of the Palestinians: asserting their rights contrary to powerful Western interests. In the case of Darfuris at risk of genocide in El Fasher: not mattering enough to have their humanity taken seriously.

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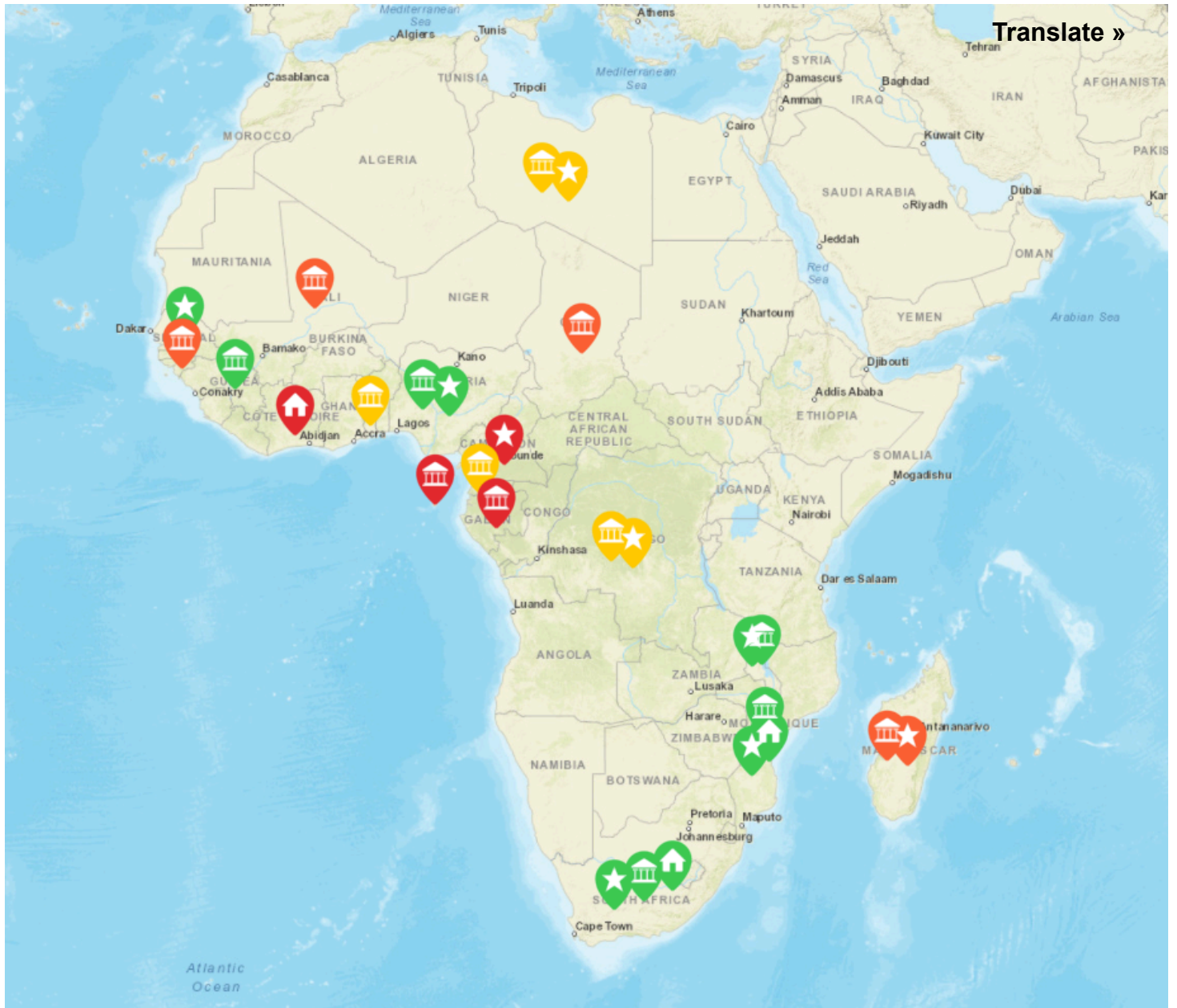
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