**Monday, June 17, 2024 / Save Darfur, again**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

NOEL KING (host, *Today, Explained*): Sudan is a very big country - the third largest in Africa. What’s happening in ONE part Sudan, is often CONTAINED to that one part.

Twenty years ago, a conflict that the U.S. and its allies called a GENOCIDE / unfolded in the far west of SUDAN in a region called Darfur. The capital meanwhile, in the east, was largely untouched.

NOEL: Then, a Civil War broke out in Sudan in April of last year, and it’s affected EVERY part of the country.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.semafor.com/hub/mixed-signals-media-podcast)*> Linda Thomas-Greenfield, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. “25 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.*

But recently another dynamic unexpectedly emerged. In Darfur, we’re AGAIN hearing warnings of a genocide.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/07/04/exp-sudan-darfur-genocide-echoes-kapila-chatterley-intv-070412pseg1-cnni-world.cnn)*> Mukesh Kapila: Because we did not complete the chapter on genocide 20 years ago, that chapter never really closed and is taking on a new life of its own.*

NOEL: On Today, Explained: what’s happening in Darfur AGAIN?

**[THEME]**

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. I’m Noel King.

Sudan is a notoriously difficult country for foreign journalists to get into during times of war. The government is tight-fisted with visas.

Nicholas Bariyo is trying to get in. He’s a correspondent for the Wall Street Journal / and we reached him at his base in Kampala, Uganda.

Nicholas has been following closely as TWO armed groups - Sudan’s army and a large and well-armed paramilitary group called the Rapid Support Forces or RSF fight for control of - and by all accounts - destroy Sudan.

SCORING IN – Plant Drone- BMC

**NICHOLAS BARIYO (reporter, Wall Street Journal):** So the major battlefield is around the capital, Khartoum, where the rapid Support Forces, the paramilitary force, quickly made a lot of gains at the beginning of the conflict, capturing large areas. And the military responded with air strikes, drone strikes to try and brave them out. So much of it has been bombed into rubble. Most of the streets, the markets, banks the shops have been looted and are empty.

*<CLIP>: Across the country more than 15,000 people are estimated to have been killed since the conflict started in April 2023, while almost 9 million have been forced to flee their homes.*

Control is still contested. The Rapid Support Forces, which is the paramilitary force, controls parts of this capital, while the other part is under the control of Sudan's military.

*<CLIP> Around 40 civilians were killed on Thursday, when RSF paramilitary forces shelled Omdurman, a city that lies across the Nile from the capital Khartoum*

And then a few months into the conflict, the Rapid Support Forces ended up capturing three of the capitals in Darfur region and are fighting to capture the only holdout capital.

*<CLIP> There are fears the worst is yet to come in the larger city of El Fasher. It is almost surrounded by the RSF. Satellite images in recent days show the apparent burning of homes in its outer neighborhoods.*

SCORING OUT

**NOEL KING:** Sudan's military is on one side. What does the country's army want?

**NICHOLAS BARIYO:** The country's army initially wanted to integrate this Rapid Support Forces, which is a militia under its command and control. But this didn't go down well with the command of the paramilitary force. So that's the major point of contention that brought things where they are at the moment.

**NOEL KING:** The militia says we're not going to be integrated into the army. Instead, we're going to fight. Does the militia want anything else other than just not being integrated? What is their objective in this war?

**NICHOLAS BARIYO:** Other than not being integrated, they also think they can take control of this country. So they are fighting for power and then the country's resources.

**NOEL KING:** Nicolas, who has the support of Sudanese civilians?

**NICHOLAS BARIYO:** It's not very clear at the moment, although I could say that majority of the civilians are not happy with the rapid support forces. Mainly because they've been accused of committing atrocities, attacking settlements, evicting people from their homes and, doing a lot of widespread robberies. That said, the military has also been accused of indiscriminate airstrikes that sometimes kill civilians.

But on the whole, the Rapid Support Forces is a bit more unpopular because they have been accused of conducting widespread atrocities targeting civilians.

*<CLIP> BBC: The rapid support forces are also accused of carrying out a massacre on wednesday in which at least 150 people died. The UN children fund says 35 children were among the victims of that attack on a village in central sudan.*

**NICHOLAS BARIYO:** There are a lot of arson attacks deliberately targeting civilian settlements. They also fire shells in civilian homes, and their attacks are widespread, especially within the capital, where they are occupying a lot of civilian homes. And then in western Darfur, it's clear that they are systematically targeting, civilian infrastructure and, civilians.

<CLIP> GUNFIRE SUDAN’s rapid support force militia in el fasher in Darfur today. Victory brings not honor but goods to loot and women to rape. No wonder millions of sudanese are fleeing the conflict. GUNFIRE

**NOEL KING:** The United Nations says MORE THAN NINE MILLION SUDANESE PEOPLE HAVE BEEN DISPLACED SINCE APRIL OF LAST YEAR. We've seen claims, credible claims that torture and rape are being used as weapons of war.The capital Khartoum has been absolutely devastated. It really is shocking. Do you have any insight into why the brutality of this war is being carried out on civilians, instead of these men just fighting each other?

**NICHOLAS BARIYO:** I think it stems from the history of this conflict,

SCORING IN – Bottom Drone Changes

back in the early 2000, when these Black communities were not happy with government and tried to rebel against the government of Omar al-Bashir, he quickly organized these Arab militias to put down this rebellion

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BbXzioD5tSw)*> FRANCE 24: it was president Bashir who ordered the army to crackdown on militants in the western region of darfur. The resulting conflict killed hundreds of thousands of people and Bashir was accused of organizing war crimes*

~~, and~~ the tactics that were used then to suppress the rebellion were very brutal, scorched earth tactics, driving communities from villages and cramming them in refugee camps and, the small cities.

Now, at that time, you had militias riding on horses and camels. They don't have military training. They don't have a lot of, training in terms of, of, of of how war is supposed to be executed. And they are trying to replicate what they did, 20 years ago, but this time at a larger scale, better armed with more money and more outside backers. And then the fact that there is an ethnic dimension in this conflict you have Arabs versus African communities.

*SCORING OUT*

**NOEL KING:** We are hearing and I imagine you're hearing there in Kampala, two very distressing words famine and genocide. The U.N. food agency, the WFP, recently warned that a famine is impending. Why the food shortages? Why is food such a concern?

**NICHOLAS BARIYO:** This has been going on for more than a year. So the farmlands abandoned. The farmers are displaced, so there is no food being grown at the moment. And then you have trade routes which have been displaced because of the conflict. Banks have closed down. The banking system has shut down. So the merchants, even in areas that are not affected by this conflict, are not able to import food because the banking system collapsed. In terms of figures, you have 18 million people who are acutely food insecure.

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tb2mqhsRZko)> Arirang News: some 40% of the population in immediate desperate need of food security assistance. Since the outbreak of armed conflict in April 2023 production of millet in Sudan has almost halved. While maize production has decreased by a quarter

**NOEL KING:** Genocide is a very specific legal term. And so it is significant that human rights observers are saying we may be looking at a genocide. What is happening in Sudan and where is it happening that has made people think there is some sustained campaign to eliminate an entire group of people?

**NICHOLAS BARIYO:** So this is started mainly… It's spread across the region of Darfur, but it started as early as June, July in West Darfur. The Rapid Support Forces, backed by their Arab militias, systematically targeted African communities. So there are a lot of tribes which are African in western Sudan and others are Arab.

SCORING IN – DED\_DED\_0185\_00601\_Ambient\_Adventures\_\_a\_\_APM-02

So there are a lot of reports from human rights groups which have documented systematic attacks.

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7S7lYWFvy4)> DW NEWS: The campaign group human rights watch is accusing paramilitary forces in sudan of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7S7lYWFvy4)> They asked what tribes we’re from. If you answered Masalit the would kill you immediately. I lied and said I am not masalit

MUSIC BREATHES

**NOEL KING:**This is the same dynamic as 20 years ago? You have Arab militias attacking African farmers. This is… the genocide that human rights observers say that may be brewing is exactly the same thing?

**NICHOLAS BARIYO:** Yes, it's exactly the same thing and the conditions are almost the same. Only that this time around there are fears that it would even get worse, because 20 years ago, the Rapid Support Forces were just a feeling of scattered militias, lightly armed with small guns. This time around, it's heavy weapons, including artillery, armored vehicles. So the conditions are the same, but the scale is likely to be worse.

NOEL: Nicholas Bariyo, The Wall Street Journal. He’s currently in Uganda. Twenty years ago, a conflict that, as Nicholas said, mirrors today’s almost EXACTLY sparked a movement in America called “Save Darfur.” It took over college campuses, Capitol Hill, even Hollywood for a time. What happened to that movement? Coming up next.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. I’m Noel King. Twenty years ago, I got my start in journalism in Sudan - covering the Darfur conflict. Every journalist in the region knew the name ERIC REEVES.

Eric was the guy writing op-eds and blog posts about the horrors unfolding in western Sudan and, eventually, urging Americans to Save Darfur.

Eric is an unusual guy. He was not REALLY an Africa expert. He was in fact an English professor at Smith College who became obsessed with Sudan after visiting in 2003.

ERIC REEVES [00:37:30] I loved the people. I loved the landscape. ~~I love being able to walk along.~~ It was in a moment in which peace had come. [00:37:38] // [00:37:46] the people were no longer looking upward to see if there were ~~aren't enough~~ bombers coming their way. [00:37:53][6.5]

NOEL: Before his Darfur advocacy, he was just an ordinary Massachussen American who made a little extra income from a hobby

ERIC REEVES (co-chair, Project Responding to Sexual Violence, Darfur): I create wooden vessels on a lathe, and sell in galleries and online and in shows,

NOEL: And gave that money to charity.

Eric Reeves: and I've always used the profits for humanitarian organizations. I settled on Doctors Without Borders as the one that was doing the best work.

NOEL: One day he was talking to an aid worker about where his money was going, Eric learned about Darfur. And then decided to make sure everyone ELSE knew about Darfur, too.

SCORING IN – Weight a Minute

**ERIC REEVES (:** It was hard not to know something about what was going on in Darfur. What we saw was that the non-Arab population, the African population was being attacked by Arab militia forces, what was called the Janjaweed militia.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://archive.org/details/Sudan_Alert20040928)*> Deutsche Welle: We crossed the border on our mule. They burned our house down and murdered my husband. Then we fled. Along the way we passed burning houses and animal carcasses.*

**ERIC REEVES:** They destroyed villages. They poisoned wells, they burned food stocks. They raped ~~tens of thousands of~~ girls and women. They killed people.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://archive.org/details/Sudan_Alert20040928)*> Deutsche Welle: THis old man is taking a short break. For the first time in days, he washes his feet to pray even though water is scarce.*

*I want to thank god that I made it over the border. Over there they’re killing us africans even though we’re Muslims. They attacked our villages on horseback and with warplanes and destroyed them.*

I published in the Washington Post in February of 2004, an op ed that put me on the map.

<VO OF [WAPO OP ED](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2004/02/25/unnoticed-genocide/d9e40128-c203-4614-86fe-b23b1f98edd7/)> *Headline: Unnoticed Genocide.*

*…The terrible realities in Darfur require that we attend to the ways in which people are being destroyed because of who they are, racially and ethnically …. \*KEEP RUNNING\**

Nothing could have been clearer that this was genocide. That opinion came to be quickly ratified by Nick Kristof of The New York Times.

The United States Congress, in a bipartisan vote, declared it to be genocide, and the Bush administration declared to be genocide in September 2004.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLhoCdPmQ6A)*> AP: COLIN POWELL: We concluded, I concluded, that genocide has been committed in Darfur and that the government of Sudan and the Janjaweed bear responsibility - and that genocide may still be occurring*

MUSIC OUT

**NOEL KING:** My recollection is that when this was identified as a genocide, suddenly all eyes are on Darfur. How important was that designation, do you think?

**ERIC REEVES:** I think it was quite significant. The word was out. It was clear what was happening. Genocide is, the ultimate human crime. And it was being committed. And we had, an abundance of evidence from human rights organizations, NGOs, non-governmental organizations on the ground, the UN and intrepid reporters, they provided a very, very loud megaphone for the word genocide.

SCORING IN — BUM BUM BUM

**NOEL KING:** By about 2006, save Darfur, this movement, was very big. It was all over college campuses. There was a massive rally on the National Mall.

CLIP OF RALLY

The junior senator from the state of illinois barack obama CROWD CHEERS

OBAMA: Silence, acquiescence, paralysis in the face of genocide is wrong

I remember George Clooney was doing advocacy.

<CLIP> CLOONEY: We need humanitarian aid to be allowed into the Sudan before it becomes the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

I remember Mia Farrow was wandering around out there. This is one of the first times in U.S. history that a campaign to prevent a genocide, to stop a genocide in such a far off place really became politically mainstream.

Can you talk about how you saw that evolve from almost no awareness to suddenly every college kid worth their salt is saying, Save Darfur.

SCORING FADES OUT

**ERIC REEVES:** TheSave Darfur movement, Such as it was, a bit pretentious in its title,

NOEL: Hm hm, fair!

ERIC: it began in 2005. And one of the things that is very clear about the Darfur genocide is that the moral equities could not be clearer. That here you had sedentary farmers being attacked in their villages by heavily armed Arab militiamen, supported by the military aircraft of the Khartoum regime and sometimes the soldiers of the Sudan Armed Forces. This was one sided. If we're talking about moral equity. And I think it was that that clarity that helped galvanize students.

I spoke to many, many campuses. And it was, I would say, in my experience, that the utter moral clarity of what was going on. That that really moved students a lot. They understood the facts, the basic facts. They understood the moral clarity, but they wanted solutions. They wanted the problem to be solvable, and they weren't patient. And none of those is good for a movement that's going to sustain political pressure.

**NOEL KING:** What was the goal of the movement at the time?folks were advocating for? What exactly? What did you want to see happen?

**ERIC REEVES:** Well, what I wanted to see happen was that nonconsensual military force deployed, whether under the UN auspices or not, in order to protect civilians, but the political resistance. Remember, this is a time of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. This was not a great time to be asking for, nonconsensual deployment of military force.

**NOEL:** Yeah.

**ERIC REEVES:** So I'm not really sure what the students expected to happen, but ironically, the election of Barack Obama ensured that, the safe Darfur movement would end. He was a catastrophically bad president for Darfur.

**ERIC REEVES** The notion as expressed by one important figure in the Obama administration that we don't want to see regime change in Khartoum

**NOEL KING:** Why was the U.S. so interested in continuing Omar al-Bashir's rule in in Khartoum, knowing he was a very bad guy.

**ERIC REEVES:** Knowing it, but alsodeeply desiring counterterrorism intelligence. That was a deep and important truth, that helped sustain, the Bashir regime, which felt that, well, if we give the U.S. what it wants in the way of counterterrorism intelligence, we can continue to prosecute, genocide in, Darfur. We can continue to make things difficult for other marginalized populations in. In Sudan and we can maintain power which was corrupt, tyrannical. Brutally destructive of Sudan's agricultural sector. But none of that adds up to enough to overcome the lust for counterterrorism intelligence.

SCORING IN – New Tension 03 The Tunnels-09

**ERIC REEVES:** In March 2009, the International Criminal Court indicted Omar al-Bashir for crimes against humanity and genocide.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=rally+washington+darfur+genocide+2006)*> The filing marks the first time prosecutors at the world's first permanent, global war crimes court have issued charges against a sitting head of state.*

He was furious,

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4GibxinlNo)*> Sunday, the country's information minister said that Sudan does not recognize the International Criminal Court and refuses to obey and decision or order it issues.*

~~and~~ he expelled 13 of the world's finest humanitarian organizations working in Darfur, thereby crippling the remainder of the U.N.’s humanitarian presence in Darfur, crippling operations.

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvyAJtSpWnQ)> As the un system we have opposed this system strongly and we will continue to do so and it’s why we continue to ask the government of sudan to reverse it.

It could not recover from those expulsions, and at the same time news journalists were not given travel permits. Human rights organizations found the access impossible.

SCORING OUT

**NOEL KING:** And so I think that 20 years later, you know, 20 years on from the original advocacy, there is a temptation to ask, how did we end up back here again? But but what I think I hear you saying is we were always kind of here. Sudan has remained unstable, and while some of the players have changed, we're still dealing with very bad men fighting for control of this country. And civilians bear the brunt.

**ERIC REEVES:** That's exactly right. the notion that somehow that it ended it is just nonsense.

**NOEL KING:** And now, unfortunately, the attention is off of Sudan. College students advocacy has moved on to other things. Even George Clooney, you're more likely to hear his name invoked in the context of Israel and Gaza than Sudan. Do you think we can look back and say, we learned anything from the advocacy of two decades ago that could help us again draw attention to what's going on in Sudan.

**ERIC REEVES:** The situation is so much more complicated now, The moral equities are so much more difficult to sort out. We're talking about the lesser of two evils, and the greater of two evils here happens to be monstrously evil, but the lesser is still monstrous.

SCORING IN – Uneasy Street-04

NOEL: Eric Reeves. He’s at SudanReeves-dot-org. Today’s episode was produced by Peter Balonon-Rosen, and edited by Matthew Collette. It was fact-checked by Laura Bullard and engineered by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir. I’m Noel King. It's Today, Explained.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**