

South Sudan on the brink of ethnic cleansing: Why is Japan expressing hesitation towards the Security Council's Arms Embargo Resolution?

What is Happening in South Sudan?

Issues regarding the deployment of troops to South Sudan have been the subject of much debate within Japan. However, this is more than a domestic political issue: it is a real and present crisis in which the lives of the Sudanese people are being destroyed.

Many of us can still recall the horrific tragedy that occurred in Rwanda in the 1990s, where genocide, ethnic cleansing, the slaughtering of civilians and the raping of women was commonplace.

Worryingly, it appears that South Sudan is nearing such a crisis, with UN experts reporting of an ever-increasing danger of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

The following is a good example of detailed reporting of this issue within Japan:

“On the 1st of this month, the United Nations Commission responsible for the investigation of human rights issues in South Sudan reported in a statement that “There is already a steady process of ethnic cleansing underway in several areas of South Sudan using starvation, gang rape and the burning of villages” and that “the international community is under an obligation to prevent (genocide).”

In July, violence broke out between state troops and opposition forces in the city of Juba. The Dinka tribe, the largest ethnic group in South Sudan, is also increasing their persecution of other tribes.

The Commission's statement noted an increase in tensions, stating that “everywhere we went across this country we heard villagers saying they are ready to shed blood to get their land back”. It expressed concern that genocide, similar to that seen in Rwanda in 1994, could be repeated.

The report stressed that not only does the international community need to continue with the planned reinforcements of Peace Keeping Operations, but that it must strengthen economic sanctions. The Commission has completed its investigations into South Sudan and will report its findings to the United Nations Human Rights Council in March of next year.”

This report is referring to the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, a body established by the Human Rights Council in March 2016, which announced the results of its 10-day on-site investigation on 1st December.

The United Nations Special Representative for the Prevention of Genocide had already emphasised to the UN Security Council at its 17th November session that she “saw all the signs that [this] ethnic hatred [...] could evolve into genocide”.

In their 1st December statement the UN experts wrote:

“As the UN Special Representative for the Prevention of Genocide said, many of the warning signals of impending genocide are already there – an existing conflict, resort to polarized ethnic identities, dehumanization, a culture of denial, displacement based on ethnicity and in some places indications of systematic violations and planning – *but the important thing is there is still time to present it.*” (emphasis added)

There is now an expectation that the international community will take steps to prevent this ethnic cleansing.

South Sudan is about to enter its dry season. As combat is difficult in the rainy season, the dry season is known as the season of conflict. Time is running out, and with the commencement of the Trump administration in January set to render international diplomacy entirely unpredictable, this is a dangerous state of affairs indeed.

Points of Contention at the UNSC: Arms Embargos & Asset Freezes

In this context, a key focal point has been the imposition of an arms embargo against South Sudan and asset freezes against senior parties to the conflict (state officials and leaders of the opposition).

Frankly, the international community should have taken such measures long before now. Why is it that we consistently fail to prevent ethnic cleansing? Why is there no sense of leadership amongst world leaders? Why do they stand by as people's lives are taken from them? When will we honestly face up to, and learn from, our past mistakes? Such as the questions that the current state of affairs raises.

And yet civil society on the ground in Juba continue to call for an arms embargo that could help save lives in this conflict. A conflict that, they say, if left untouched, could well result in genocide.

On 30th November, the United States (through Ambassador Samantha Power) submitted a draft resolution on an arms embargo to the UNSC, but it had to be abandoned. This resulted from the fact that the USA believed that it could not secure the 9 votes necessary for the adoption of a UNSC resolution.

The current members of the UNSC, including the Permanent Members (UK, USA, France, Russia, China), are Angola, Egypt, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal, Spain, Ukraine, Uruguay and Venezuela.

Having spoken to NGO activists in New York, it would appear that the abandonment resulted not only from a lack of support by Russia, China, Venezuela and the African states, but also from the USA's inability to secure the support of states including Japan and Malaysia.

The matter has been comprehensively analysed in a column in Foreign Policy where it is written that Japan “is reluctant to confront South Sudan while hundreds of its own peacekeepers are there.”

Amongst those connected to the UNSC that I have spoken to, there is much speculation as to the reason for Japan's lack of support. "Because they have deployed troops there, is Japan attempting to avoid confirming the existence of a potential genocide?" questions one. "Are they attempting to avoid a negative reaction to their troop deployments?" asks another. Still another queries "Would the lack of an arms embargo not increase the danger to Japanese troops?". I do not know the true intentions of the Japanese government.

It is time for Japan to take a strong cooperative stance for conflict resolution at the UNSC

The internationally recognised fact that genocide currently poses a great danger has not been adequately transmitted within Japan. One wonders whether Japan possesses the appropriate attitude towards this growing crisis.

To a certain extent, when troops are deployed for PKOs, it is as if they are hostages of the host state. As such, taking diplomatic action that might provoke a host state that is party to a conflict does become more difficult. Yet, surely, it is a misplacement of priorities to take steps that render ineffective the international community's attempts to prevent the intensification of the conflict.

NGOs often debate the priority between the completion of a project and the achievement of a mission. The success of a project (e.g. the deploying of troops) must necessarily be guided by the achievements of the aims of the mission (e.g. the returning of peace and security to South Sudan). It must follow, then, that actions which may benefit the project in the short term, but damage the wider purpose of the mission, should be avoided.

Many Japanese NGOs have taken to opposing the deploying of troops to South Sudan. This is largely due to the domestic debate over the constitutionality of collective defence and the dangerous effect it may have on Japanese NGOs. This has led some to question whether this is an appropriate contribution towards securing peace in South Sudan, and precisely what Japan should do if the conflict were to intensify.

Yet, given that Japan has deployed troops, its abnegation of its responsibility to prevent genocide through its hesitation to support effective UNSC measures must be criticised as a misplacement of priorities. Indeed, the deployment itself may be criticised as a measure taken out of self-interest, not out of a desire for peace in South Sudan.

The Japanese government, rather than appealing to a domestic political agenda, must fulfil its key responsibility to the international community and the UNSC to prevent genocide. And at a time when the conflict is spreading out of Juba into the surrounding areas, if it is thought that there is a risk to the deployed troops, Japan should consider ordering their withdrawal.

The UNSC now must:

- 1) Adopt a resolution that would effectively impose an arms embargo and;
- 2) Adopt a resolution that would establish a targeted sanctions regime to be imposed against senior parties to the conflict

The Sentry, a watchdog established by Hollywood star George Clooney, held a press conference in September of this year to announce the publication of their report 'War Crimes Shouldn't Pay'. This report highlights for the international community, the ways in which the kleptocratic motivations are driving the leadership of both parties to the conflict.

This civil war is causing significant harm to the South Sudanese economy, and it is imperative that any incentives for its continuation should be removed. In order to do this, the UNSC should impose asset freezes against senior parties to the conflict through a targeted sanctions regime.

A lobbyist in New York told me that "How Japan acts at the UNSC in the coming weeks will have a direct impact on the state of affairs in South Sudan."

Considering the power balance of the UNSC, Japan is often regarded as carrying a heavy burden. If we observe the Council's current configuration, the importance of Japan's contribution to this issue becomes ever apparent.

Whilst action may be long overdue, with the season of conflict approaching, and with measures still available to prevent genocide and the intensification of this conflict, all eyes rest on the Japanese government's diplomatic approach.