We're late helping Sudan but maybe not too late

By Sarah Mathis
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This week, voters in southern Sudan have been lining up before dawn for a referendum on whether to form a new nation, independent from the north. The date for this referendum was set five years ago at the culmination of a long peace process ending a civil war that claimed approximately 2 million lives. The conflict had lasted for all but 11 years of the previous half-century.

I was reminded of this referendum through the news that actor George Clooney was raising money to point satellites at Sudan for the hefty price tag of $10,000 per image. "We are the anti-genocide paparazzi," Clooney told Time magazine. The project's website emotionally argues: "We were late to Rwanda. We were late to the Congo. We were late to Darfur. There is no time to wait in Sudan."

It is hard to imagine what it means to be "on time" in southern Sudan when we are looking at the end of a peace process after one of the longest-running and bloodiest conflicts of the 20th century in Africa. This quote also neatly sidesteps a long history of missed opportunities and botched interventions in African conflicts by foreign powers and international organizations.

Much of the public attention on Sudan from high-profile celebrities has stemmed from the interest in the much smaller conflict in Darfur, a region in the western part of northern Sudan. It is not clear why some conflicts draw high levels of public scrutiny while others do not, but current attention on southern Sudan is helpful if it can be sustained.

The African Union, the United Nations and the United States have all been engaged in diplomatic efforts to keep the peace process on track in Sudan. However, Washington's treatment of Sudan has also been shaped by the war on terror. The conflict in southern Sudan has been characterized as that of a wealthier, Muslim north fighting a poorer and largely Christian south. This depiction obscures a long and complex history. For centuries, being an Arabic-speaking Muslim gave people privileges, favoring these identities in ways that remain key sources of conflict today. However, many northern Sudanese are also indigenously African and less distinguishable from their neighbors in the south than the rhetoric suggests. During the colonial period, the British also treated the north and the south as two separate entities, introducing Christianity in the south and reinforcing the regional divisions. This period also set the stage for the highly uneven development that continues today. When independence arrived in 1956, the south found itself dominated by a much more powerful north and rebelled.

Local issues, including struggles for control of resources (primarily land, water and oil), have played a key role in this conflict. While southern Sudan has 75 percent of the oil, the pipeline runs through the north, making the two sides highly interdependent. One of the issues that remain is the status of the highly
contested, oil-rich province of Abyei, one of the few places that have experienced violence during the referendum this week.

China is a primary trading partner of Sudan, and Chinese oil companies are heavily invested in the region. We can only hope that the United States and China will use their diplomatic clout to help the sides resolve issues peacefully rather than letting their own ideological and economic agendas shape the process. President Barack Obama has already taken steps in this direction, offering to loosen sanctions and remove Sudan from the terrorism list as the referendum proceeds peacefully.

We are already late to Sudan, but this is an important moment of possibility for sustaining peace in a region that has seen a tremendous amount of strife.

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