While the crisis in Darfur simmers, the larger problem of Sudan's survival as a state is becoming increasingly urgent. Old tensions between the Arabs of the Nile River valley, who have held power for a century, and marginalized groups on the country's periphery are turning into a national crisis. Engagement with Khartoum may be the only way to avert another civil war in Sudan, and even that may not be enough.

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Few international issues have caught the attention of the American people as much as have the atrocities in Darfur. The Sudanese government and the Janjaweed militias, an Arab supremacist movement, have been carrying out a horrifying campaign of ethnic cleansing against African tribes. Some 2,700 villages have been destroyed, and as a result of the violence and the related starvation and disease, some 250,000 Sudanese have died, most in 2003 and 2004, and another two million have fled to refugee camps. The Bush administration has called these atrocities a genocide. U.S. human rights organizations, U.S. religious institutions, and a burgeoning U.S. student movement have organized a national campaign to ensure that policymakers in Washington do not overlook the crisis. Both the Democratic and the Republican candidates for president have put Darfur on their foreign policy agendas.

But while this crisis simmers, the larger problem of Sudan's survival as a state is becoming increasingly urgent. Trends more ominous than even the carnage in Darfur could bring the country far more bloodshed soon. Long-standing tensions between the Arabs who populate the Nile River valley and have held power for a century and marginalized groups on the country's periphery are mutating into a national crisis once again. The tenuous 2005 peace deal that ended the civil war between the Arabs in the north and the Christians and the animists in the south is in danger; new strains in these groups' relations nearly broke out into a full-scale war late last year. Now, neither this situation nor the conflict in Darfur can be resolved without reference to the other. More crises loom as well. The Nubian people of the Nile River valley nearly rebelled last year over a dam project that threatened to destroy their homeland, and a 2006 peace agreement between the government and the Beja and Rashaida peoples in eastern Sudan is near breakdown. The year ahead may be the most important in Sudan's postcolonial history: either the country holds free and fair multiparty elections and ends two decades of autocratic rule or it disintegrates, plunging this volatile region into its most severe crisis yet.