

A no-flight zone is key

International Herald Tribune

By Kurt Bassuener

February 1, 2006

[SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) Last month the African Union took the groundbreaking step of acknowledging that its more than 7,000-man force in Darfur, western Sudan, was incapable of stopping the Khartoum government from its continued brutalization of the civilian population, and that it would support being relieved by a larger, stronger United Nations force, as mooted by the UN secretary general, Kofi Annan.

Annan said an effective force would require state-of-the-art equipment to prevent the murders, rapes, and mass displacement that have long been hallmarks of Khartoum's war in Darfur.

Annan recognizes that air power is essential if Darfur's civilians are to be protected from their own government and the janjaweed raiders to whom it has outsourced conduct of its genocidal policy. The African Union force's lack of tactical air power has long limited its ability to conduct its mission, which remains under threat of Sudan's air superiority.

The AU command confronted Khartoum with documentation of its use of air power against the civilian population last autumn, with photographs of an attack committed by its air force on the Abu Shoek refugee camp. Such attacks will continue so long as they remain possible.

The ability to protect civilians will remain crippled until an international protection force has complete air superiority over Darfur, denying flight to the Sudanese air force. Such a no-flight operation would also have the ability to provide close air support to that force and conduct air strikes on targets as requested by the force commander.

The current AU force is vulnerable to retaliatory strikes by the Sudanese air force. Having air superiority would deter further attacks on civilians on the ground, as well as prevent them from the air. In addition, such a no-flight zone would assist both the protection force and humanitarian assistance by providing real-time aerial surveillance of Darfur, an area the size of France. A no-flight zone is also essential to bridging a transition from the underpowered AU mission to a stronger UN force.

Control over Darfur's skies can be established quickly from France's air bases in Chad, which are already equipped for operations by tactical fighters. There is also a wealth of tactical air power available from NATO air forces. A former U.S. Air Force chief of staff, General Merrill McPeak, told the Washington Post a year ago that the assets needed to conduct such a mission are a mere 12 to 18 fighter aircraft, 4 AWACS/AEW control aircraft, and some additional support planes and personnel. This option has yet to be embraced by NATO, but the need has now been articulated by Annan.

If NATO is serious about its assistance effort in Darfur, it should offer air cover to the currently mandated AU force immediately. By so doing, it would preclude the requirement to get UN Security Council approval, bypassing likely resistance from Russia and China, which are both deeply economically engaged with the Khartoum regime.

A no-flight zone would limit Khartoum's ability to prevent an effective UN follow-on force. In fact, establishing a NATO no-flight zone to serve the ongoing African Union mission would make more likely the fielding of a UN-mandated ground force capable of protecting Darfur's population.

There remains an appalling policy vacuum on the part of the United States and Europe toward Darfur. Assistance by NATO and the EU to the AU force has never included the air power that could so rapidly change the situation on the ground.

If the West is serious about stopping the mayhem in Darfur and offering real protection to the uprooted civilian population, it needs to summon the fortitude to cease treating Darfur as collateral damage of the Iraq war and other policies that create friction with the Muslim world, and offer the sort of assistance that only it can provide - both in the air, and on the ground.

(Kurt Bassuener is a senior associate at the Democratization Policy Council, a trans-Atlantic initiative for accountability in democracy promotion.)