

From the Baltimore Sun

Taking a bold stand for the people of Darfur

By Don Cheadle and John Prendergast

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A year ago, we went to Darfur to document the horrors that were occurring there and to try to determine why so little was being done in response.

The African Union troops deployed there told us that they were too small a force with too weak a mandate to make any real difference. Homeless Darfurians told us they would hear strong comments by American officials on the radio but weren't being protected from continuing attacks.

A year later, we sit frozen in time. The only changes on the ground are that Darfur is becoming more unstable, humanitarian aid to the 2.5 million homeless more irregular, government support for the deadly Janjaweed militias more pronounced and cross-border war between Sudan and neighboring Chad more likely.

Out of nowhere, President Bush did surprise even his own top officials Feb. 17 when, during a question-and-answer session in Orlando, Fla., he called for a more muscular policy on Darfur. In keeping with his rhetoric on the issue - invoking the term "genocide" repeatedly and pledging that what happened during the Rwandan genocide would not happen "on my watch" - he proposed a doubling of international troops and a larger role for NATO to stop the atrocities.

What happened? Why did Mr. Bush overrule key officials in his administration who were reluctant to act more boldly? After all, the CIA has argued that the United States needs to preserve its relationship with the Khartoum regime in order to maximize counterterrorism cooperation, the Pentagon has argued that our military assets are overstretched and the State Department has argued that getting a peace deal in Darfur is the only way to stop the violence.

Our answer may sound corny, even Pollyannish. Mr. Bush was persuaded to act in the face of vested interests and institutional obstruction because people all over the United States have been writing letters and making phone calls by the thousands demanding that the post-Holocaust phrase "never again" finally be given some meaning. The collective voice was too loud to ignore; the president wants to stand with the people over the usual forces of institutional obstruction and apathy.

There are three interrelated forces at play here:

- The power of imagination. Despite a lack of pictures or consistent media coverage, citizens across the country have organized events, held demonstrations, contacted members of Congress and demanded that the U.S. government do more about Darfur.

- The courage of conviction. The phrase "never again" has become a symbol of empty rhetoric that every politician dutifully mouths at relevant events. Politicians all over the United States, including Mr. Bush, are finally saying enough is enough, standing up and being counted.
- The creation of a movement. Slowly, steadily, we have seen across the United States the development of a small movement of committed activists - many of them first-timers - organizing and pressing for a bolder U.S. response. We haven't experienced anything like it since we participated in the anti-apartheid movement regarding South Africa from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s.

Although Mr. Bush's announcement that he will lead on Darfur is not as dramatic as Nelson Mandela's release from prison, it could have the same meaning for the embattled and hunted people of Darfur. But only if he leads internationally in ensuring that a relevant force is deployed, that accountability for atrocities is realized and that peace efforts are intensified.

We continue to be convinced that the growing chorus of outrage from Florida to California can stop war crimes and reduce the cries of agony in places such as Darfur and the Congo. The U.S. government can take a leading role in stopping atrocities without putting U.S. forces on the ground in large numbers. The ongoing letter-writing campaign for Darfur is needed to help transform Mr. Bush's rhetoric into strong action.

Our executive branch won't act unless it hears from Congress, and Congress won't push the envelope unless it hears from its constituents.

Don Cheadle received an Oscar nomination in 2004 for performance by an actor in a leading role in the movie "Hotel Rwanda." John Prendergast is a senior adviser at the International Crisis Group. They are writing a book on the power of citizen action. Mr. Prendergast's e-mail is jprendergast@crisisgroup.org.