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Bandages and Bayonets

By Nicholas D. Kristof

GOZ BEIDA, Chad

In diplomatic circles, the Sudanese government can be wonderfully polished as it scoffs at accusations of genocide and denounces calls for U.N. peacekeepers in Darfur.

In isolated villages, everything is more straightforward — like the men in Sudanese military uniforms who on Tuesday captured Abdullah Idris, a 27-year-old father of two, in the fields as he was farming. They tried to shoot him in the chest, but the gun misfired.

“So they beat him to the ground,” explained Osman Omar, a nephew of Mr. Abdullah who was one of several neighbors who recounted the events in the same way. “And then they used their bayonets to gouge out his eyes.”

Mr. Abdullah lay on his back on a hospital bed, his eye sockets swathed in bandages soaked in blood and pus. A sister sat on the floor beside him, crying; his wife and small children stood nearby, looking overwhelmed and bewildered. He was so traumatized in the incident that he has been unable to speak since, but he constantly reaches out to hold the hands of his family members.

Three men and two women were killed in that attack by the janjaweed, the militias of Arab nomads that have been slaughtering black African farmers for more than three years now. A 26-year-old woman was kidnapped, and nobody has seen her since.

The janjaweed even explained themselves to the people they were attacking. Survivors quoted them as shouting racial epithets against blacks and yelling, “We are going to kill you, and we are going to take your land.”

Mr. Abdullah’s eyes were gouged out as part of a wave of recent attacks here in southeastern Chad. Officials from the U.N. refugee agency counted at least 220 people killed in the last week in this area near Goz Beida.

We’re used to seeing brutal janjaweed attacks in Darfur itself and along the border with Chad, but now they have reached 60 miles and more inside Chad, and Chadian Arab groups are joining in the attacks on black African tribes.

As I write this on my laptop, I’ve just returned from a long drive through abandoned countryside. The village of Tamajour was still smoldering after being burned by janjaweed attackers two days earlier.

I finally found some residents of Tamajour, clustered around the hospital of Goz Beida. Abdelkarim Zakaria, a 25-year-old man, lay in a bed with two bullets lodged in his back. Friends had carried him more than 20 miles to the hospital to save his life.

Outside the hospital, two old women from Tamajour lay on the ground, suffering from terrible burns. The women were too feeble to flee, and they said that the janjaweed fighters set fire to their huts even though they knew the women were inside. One woman, Gida Zakaria, who said she thought she was about 70, had a back that was just an ulcerating mass of raw flesh.

After more than three years of such brutality, it seems incredibly inadequate for the international community simply to hand out bandages when old women are roasted in their huts and young men have their eyes gouged out. What we need isn't more bandages, but the will to stand up to genocide.

A starting point would be to rush U.N. troops to Chad and the Central African Republic to prevent the cancer of genocide from completely upending these two countries. It's incomprehensible that we're allowing the madness of Darfur to spread inexorably into two more countries.

President Bush could visit Chad and the Central African Republic as a show of support to keep those two countries from collapsing — and he could invite Chinese leaders, who provide Sudan with the guns used for atrocities, to join him.

At the least, Mr. Bush could dispatch Condi Rice to Chad to show the U.S.'s support — then have her stop off in Cairo for meetings with Arab leaders on the crisis. The U.S. could also try targeted sanctions against Sudanese leaders, a no-fly zone to stop Sudanese jets from bombing civilians, and especially a major new effort to start a real peace process in Darfur, for ultimately only a peace agreement can end these horrors.

The most painful sight I've seen here isn't Mr. Abdullah's bloody face, but the expression of disgust on his children's faces as they stare at him. You see that, and you can't help feeling equal horror and disgust — at our shamefully weak international response, which allows this first genocide of the 21st century to drag on and on.

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