

January 14, 2007

“A Tragedy without End: The Deteriorating Security Situation and Khartoum’s Intransigence are Sustaining Genocide by Attrition in Darfur”

By Eric Reeves

Almost incomprehensibly, the humanitarian crisis in Darfur continues to deepen, threatening the lives of more than 4.5 million people now characterized by the UN as “conflict-affected.” Security throughout the humanitarian theater, including much of eastern Chad, is deteriorating badly. Acutely vulnerable aid operations now operate amidst intolerable levels of danger, even as these operations alone can avert cataclysmic human destruction within populations terribly weakened by four years of genocidal counter-insurgency warfare. Hundreds of thousands of civilians will die if there is no significant improvement in current security conditions.

More than 1 million human beings have no access to basic humanitarian Assistance—food, primary medical care, and provision of clean water. Oxfam International reported in late December that more than a third of Darfur’s conflict-affected population was “effectively out of bounds to aid agencies.” This grim news came as UNICEF reported that nutritional studies revealed “over 70% of the population is experiencing food insecurity”; localized studies found acute malnutrition affecting 20% of children under five. The mortality rate within this most vulnerable population is certainly very high wherever humanitarian assistance is unavailable.

There were eight emergency evacuations of threatened humanitarian workers in December alone, involving 400 personnel at various locations throughout Darfur. The same number of personnel were evacuated from aid operations in eastern Chad, the scene of rapidly accelerating ethnic violence, most of it by Khartoum’s Janjaweed militia proxies or Chadian rebel groups supported by the National Islamic Front regime.

Humanitarian access is at its lowest point since early 2004, the most violent phase of the Darfur genocide. Evacuations and withdrawals by major humanitarian organizations continue, with a steady attenuation of relief capacity. In turn, there are fewer and fewer international witnesses to the ethnic crimes that define conflict in Darfur. Khartoum’s severe crackdown on journalists traveling to the region has also reduced dramatically the means of chronicling accelerating genocidal destruction.

This is the context in which to understand the meaning of President Omar al-Bashir’s very recent insistence that Khartoum will not allow UN troops into Darfur—indeed, that Darfur doesn’t need UN troops. Asserting that Khartoum’s

“experience with UN operations in the world is not encouraging,” al-Bashir went on to declare:

"There are sufficient forces in the Sudan from African countries to maintain order and they can provide order. All we need is funding for the African troops."

It is a political and moral failure of the first order that this conspicuous mendacity should be the obstacle to deployment of the UN forces necessary to protect rapidly collapsing humanitarian operations and vulnerable populations. Acquiescence before al-Bashir's self-serving defiance makes a mockery of the world's notional commitment to a "responsibility to protect" civilians endangered in precisely the ways we see in Darfur. This "responsibility" was a centerpiece in the "Outcome Document" of the September 2005 UN World Summit. It was unanimously accepted in UN Security Council Resolution 1674 (April 2006), which

“reaffirms the provisions of paragraphs 138 and 139 of the World Summit Outcome Document regarding the responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.”

Politically savvy as always, al-Bashir and the National Islamic Front regime realized that their consequential defiance of the UN needed some “public relations” complement. This is the real significance of the 60-day “ceasefire” announced during the stay of would-be US diplomat and presidential aspirant Bill Richardson, who recently traveled to Sudan (and will be followed by Jan Eliasson, UN special representative of the Secretary-General). Although packaged as a breakthrough of sorts by both Richardson and Khartoum, the reality is that a cease-fire has been nominally in place for over two years, and has proved meaningless since it began in April 2004.

Moreover, we should bear in mind that Khartoum's regular forces have been badly mauled in recent months by the rebel groups that did not sign the disastrous Darfur Peace Agreement (Abuja, May 2006). A cease-fire will allow the regime to re-group, re-supply, and re-constitute its depleted and demoralized military units in both North and West Darfur. The regime's Janjaweed militia forces have also suffered significant military losses, chiefly at the hands of the potent rebel alliance known as the National Redemption Front.

At the same time, there is no reason to believe that this cease-fire can be monitored any more effectively than the previous one: the African Union will still be able to do little more than file reports on the very limited number of violations it has the ability to detect. And we may also be sure that Khartoum will continue to hamstring monitoring operations by denying the AU mission an unfettered fuel supply for its aircraft, by creating onerous bureaucratic burdens, and by imposing crippling curfews and flight restrictions.

Moreover, any cease-fire violations that are reported will certainly be explained away by Khartoum as “defensive actions,” the justification repeatedly offered for bombing attacks on non-combatants and civilian villages. And what will be the consequences for cease-fire violations that are confirmed? What is the African Union in a position to do now that it could not do under the terms of the previous cease-fire? What significant, credible penalties are spelled out? There are no encouraging answers

Certainly the non-signatory rebel groups will be watching Khartoum’s behavior with a fully justified skepticism. Violations, whether by the regime’s regular forces or Janjaweed militias, will not be accepted passively. The likelihood of the cease-fire holding is exceedingly remote, as is the prospect for a meaningful negotiating process emerging from whatever diminishment of hostilities may occur. With unflinching political instincts, Khartoum has ensured that the fatally flawed Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) remains the only basis for further talks. Since the security provisions of the DPA, in particular disarming of the Janjaweed, depend largely upon Khartoum’s good will, this will be unacceptable both to rebel groups and to those in the camps for displaced persons.

The contemptibly small compensation provisions of the DPA—\$30 million in the first year, with nothing further guaranteed—would also be preserved if the Abuja agreement serves as a starting point for renewed negotiations. This amount represents less than \$8 per conflict-affected person, for millions of people who have lost everything over the past four years. For Darfuris this is simply not an acceptable basis for further negotiations on a key issue, even as Khartoum successfully insists at every juncture on a further diplomatic enshrining of the terms of the DPA, including as a condition of its accepting the new “cease-fire.”

Khartoum’s adamant rejection of the large UN force and robust mandate authorized by Security Council Resolution 1706 remains unchallenged. The consequences will be further deterioration in security for humanitarian operations in Darfur, as well as eastern Chad. This in turn will produce a continuing restriction in access, as well as increasing evacuations, even total withdrawal by a growing number of aid groups in Darfur. Civilian mortality will be catastrophic.

This is the grim syllogism of genocidal destruction in Darfur. There is no evidence that the terms have changed or will in the foreseeable future. Unless the international community—in particular China, host of the 2008 Olympics—finds the will to confront Khartoum over its intransigence, a savage genocide by attrition will continue indefinitely.

The Guardian