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An Interview with EU Commissioner Louis Michel

The EU and Darfur

By Eric Reeves

After I wrote this (<http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w061023&s=reeves102706>) piece for TNR Online last October about Europe's indifference to Darfur, the European Union contacted my editor offering to to set the record straight. Eventually, Louis Michel, the EU commissioner for development and humanitarian aid, agreed to an interview with me, and TNR recorded our (sometimes testy) exchange. You can listen to the audio here or read the transcript.

Q: Okay, this is Eric Reeves. Good to be speaking with you Commissioner Michel.

A: Yeah. Hello.

Q: In September 2004 the parliament of the European Union voted 566 to 6 with some abstentions to declare that realities in Darfur were "tantamount to genocide." Can you explain this peculiar phrase and why it was used?

A: I was not—

Q: Let me finish the question please. In English and French there is no semantic difference to realities described as "genocide" and as "tantamount to genocide". Tantamount means, in fact, equivalent in significance. So, what was going on here?

A: First of all, here, I never have, personally, never have used the term or the semantic "genocide", because it is a very controversial, uh, concept, it is a very controversial, uh, discussion and I refuse to enter in the discussion for the moment because I know the definition and uh, the concept of genocide can lead us to the impossibility, the complete impossibility, to resolve in a sustainable way the situation in Darfur. And I don't, uh, I am not there, it's not my mission to complicate things, it's to make things easier, that's my mission. So I will not take part in the discussions about genocide, not genocide. I can only say one thing: it is an awful situation in Darfur. And it is because it is an important and difficult situation that we have to try to make things easier and not more difficult.

Q: So you have no comment, in effect, on the vote of the Parliament of the European Union.

A: The European parliament is the European parliament and I fully respect them but—

Q: Okay, okay, I just want to make clear that you say their vote—566 to 6 declaring realities as tantamount to genocide—is something you have no interest in.

A: Yes, I am interested in what they are saying but—

Q: Well, then let's go on to the next question—

A: We—Can you listen to me one minute? I of course respect fully what they decided and what they said but I am not obliged to agree with their reading of the facts—

Q: That's not what I was asking. I was asking for an explanation—

A: The explanation, I of course can take into account what they were decided about that, but I am not, uh, I am not, uh, The-the-the mission of the parliament and the duty and the mission of the parliament is not completely the same as the duty and mission of the commissioner. The commissioner has to try to bring positions together. My mission is not to be making declarations or speeches about that, my mission is to make things easier for the people living in a bad world.

Q: Well, let's talk about that, then. Why hasn't the European Union done more to secure the release of Suleiman Jamous who has been in prison for eight months now in Kadugli. How can the impending commander's conference scheduled for February 19 succeed with the UN serving in effect as Jamous' jailer to be sure at Khartoum's behest. But senior commanders, the best of the rebel commanders, have made clear that there will be no successful conference, indeed no conference, without the widely respected elder statesmen and the humanitarian coordinator of the rebel groups, Suleiman Jamous. Why hasn't the European Union done more to secure his release after eight months, why is he being treated like a prisoner of war when his presence is so critical for peace in Darfur?

A: You accuse the European Union of not having done enough when you don't even know what the European Union has done. The European Union is permanently [unintelligible] of this problem, so it is an empty and very easy accusation you are expressing. The European Union is working a lot on this issue, but maybe not perfectly. But I think if we want to succeed in such things difficult issues we have to be sometimes confidential.

Q: Well I accept that it sometimes has to be confidential, but we are now less than a week away from the commander's conference. I spoke to Suleiman

Jamous this weekend. He needs medical treatment urgently, and if he is to participate in this conference, he will need immediate release.

A: We are arguing in favor of that and we are complaining about that and we are accusing Khartoum about that but we cannot make war. I cannot send troops to resolve the program. The only means we have are the semantic, the dialogue, the discussion, our pressure, but I have no real means to oblige. I cannot do that.

Q: Well let's talk about what can be done publicly. The European Union has repeatedly met and decided not to impose economic sanctions on Khartoum, as recently as this past week. Can you explain to me, when all indications are that more pressure needs to be exerted on Khartoum, why the European Union consistently refuses to impose sanctions on—

A: Because I never believe—I am a strong believer in the [unintelligible] of, even in the negative consequences, of economic sanctions. I never principally—I've always been against economical sanctions. Because economical sanctions are punishing the population and not the leaders.

Q: What about—

A: Economic embargos, for instance, are punishing the population and not the leaders.

Q: What about the targeted sanctions such as the international crisis groups supports?

A: That's another issue. But—

Q: Why doesn't the—

A: The question is—The question is—Excuse me sir, the question is are we willing to be useful and to help a dialogue open or do you want us to close all the dialogues possible and then you will have no solution at all.

Q: I see a difference in dialogue and pressure, myself. The regime has shown for years that it is unwilling to engage in meaningful dialogue without much greater pressure—

A: Look you can also describe the story in another way. And this is not my story, and this is not my judgment, and this is not my assessment, but when you speak for instance with President [Umar] Bashir, what is he telling you? He is telling me, I have given many concessions and I have made the main concession in the south north agreement. I accepted a determination which was, for me, a very big risk. And I was promised, when I made that

concession, that for instance the commercial embargo would be lifted that for instance big pressure would be put on the rebels in order to bring them to sign, and all these things and I also was promised other guarantees. I did not receive anything about the promises that were made to me uh in exchange for the concession I made in the Darfur peace agreement. I don't—

Q: Are we talking about the Darfur Peace Agreement or the comprehensive—?

A: I don't say—Yeah. I don't say that President Bashir is right, I only tell you what his impression, what are his frustrations about this. So it is too easy to say my story is the right story and the other story is the wrong story. The truth is much more difficult than that.

Q: So you're suggesting that there is some truth to what Umar Al-Bashir says when he describes realities in Darfur. When he says there are fewer than 10,000 dead, when he says he has no connection to the Janjaweed, when he says there is no bombing when the African Union reports there is bombing. What connection does Omar Bashir have to the truth?

A: I—I have no—I don't trust Umar Bashir when he tells me there is no connection to the Janjaweed, which in my opinion he has, of course, connection to the Janjaweed. Of course I am accusing him when he is bombing civil persons—civil people; of course I am accusing him of that. And I say all this, and I am not taking as the truth what Bashir is telling me. I only tell you that you cannot just say well let us not speak anymore with Bashir. Let us [unintelligible] him. Then after that, after that, what is left?

Q: I say we speak to him from a position of strength!

A: Excuse me—

Q: And that position of strength must come with both carrots and sticks. And if there are no sticks then you will not have movement and that is the story of the last four years.

A: Yes, but after emptying all the solutions of dialogue. And you cannot have and if you want the European Union on the same line for instance as the US then we have to discuss before taking a statement, then we have to discuss closely together and not just asking us to follow. That is not possible. I want to discuss broadly with the US whom I consider as the best part of the European Unions and I think for the US the best is of all the European Union. But we have also to explain to our people, we have also to explain the situation, and not just say look we are following you. No! We must—

Q: Nobody's saying this. That's a ridiculous caricature—

A: It is not a caricature.

Q: —of international diplomacy. Let me change subjects. Is there some trigger for nonconsensual deployment of the sort French Foreign Minister [Philippe] Douste-Blazy spoke of last September? He said it's real question when we have so many hundreds of thousands of lives at risk. What happens if Khartoum escalates the violence in Darfur in such a way that humanitarian groups are forced to exit? Jan Egeland predicted over two years ago when there were two million fewer conflict effected people that as many as 100,000 people could die every month in the event of a full scale humanitarian evacuation. We are seeing signs that we are very close to that moment. Is there any trigger, in your mind or in the mind of the European Union, for nonconsensual deployment to rescue people who are being slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands.

A: I think we are of course in favor of deployment of the AMIS and going home with the AMIS and I am strongly in favor of turning the AMIS mission into a UN mission. But for the moment you can not do it because Bashir is not moving. And I am accusing—I have half accused Bashir, and I have spoke to him about that, about the fact that he didn't give access or help for access for the humanitarian workers to the civil victims, we are on the same line on this issue.

Q: But you're not answering my question. I said is there some threshold some trigger for nonconsensual deployment forces. Let me finish. Is there some threshold or trigger for the deployment of military force in the event that humanitarians like Médecins du Monde continue to withdraw from Darfur. If we see that hundreds of thousands of people may die month in and month out and we know that the African Union cannot possibly stop the violence and protect the humanitarian organizations, is there no threshold for nonconsensual military deployment.

A: I think for the moment it would be rather difficult to have military deployment coming from the European armies. I cannot speak in the place of the states or the governments, but I'm not sure that it would be easy to have implication of Europeans in such things.

Q: Would you be in favor of it in principle? Let us imagine that the Europeans were able to bring together the military resources and we saw that hundreds of thousands of people were facing forced humanitarian withdrawal, would you be in favor of nonconsensual deployment there?

A: I am not at all principally against such an intervention of the European forces. I always said I was in favor of European forces being able to deploy for peacekeeping or this kind of mission. I can only tell you that it would

probably not be so easy for this kind of decision. But I'm not principally against it, I am for it, if it is possible.

Q: Can you explain to me the financial stinginess of countries like France, Germany, Italy, the Benelux countries in responding to the crisis in Darfur, when compared to Britain, Ireland, Canada and the United States?

A: What is the question?

Q: The question is if we look at how much different countries have contributed to humanitarian relief in Darfur, certain countries come out way way behind the US GB Ire and Canada, and these countries at the bottom of the list tend to be France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Spain. Why is this?

A: Why is this? Some countries are more committed or more concerned. You have also the public opinion, sometimes you have very strong commitment from public opinions in favor of certain issues, so you have these—you will always have this kind of different.

Q: Well that's a good segue into my next question. Why is it that there is so little in the way of European civil society activism on Darfur? Certainly when compared to the US, European governments just don't feel the pressure.

A: Excuse me, sir, this is also very strange what you say there. Because the European Union, the European Commission, I am in charge to the European Commission, we have spent three hundred million Euro to finance the AMIS mission. I am waiting for another donor spending as much money as we did.

Q: No, no at the moment I am not talking about the funding of AMIS, which has taken a variety of forms, some of them kind, I'm right now talking about European civil society activism and why it is so far behind—

A: No, I cannot agree with—You also have a very caricatural understanding of the European Union and the European states—

Q: I don't think you're understanding the question. The question is about ordinary citizens.

A: But if you don't allow me to answer the question then it is difficult for me to give you my answer. Just listen to what I am willing to say to you. If the public opinions in the European countries would not be concerned about Darfur, never would it have been possible to take 300 million Euro from the development finances to pay for military action in Darfur. So you are not right when you think when you have the impression that in Europe public opinions are not concerned with what happens in Darfur. But we cannot be the

only who are paying for Darfur. We are paying a lot 300 million Euro! Most probably I will find 45 million more, and then probably 70 million more, to make the gap with 2008 to finance the extension of AMIS. All this because there is no agreement between Bashir and the international community to accept the transfer to the UN. So I don't think and I don't feel there is a lack of sensitivity in public opinions in Europe about that, I think the Darfur issue is a very sensitive issue in the European public opinions.

Q: Well, in fact, I speak very frequently to European journalists who come to me and I ask them why it is that the European civil society movement is so far behind that in the US and they confess with embarrassment that they don't know, but they say to me that there is nothing like American civil society action on Darfur anywhere in Europe. Perhaps most strongly in the UK, but certainly on continental Europe there is nothing that compares. So we simply have empirically very different experiences of what European civil activism amounts to. Let me ask you about Chad. Why has there been no more effective effort to get a force to eastern Chad with the French airbase at Abéché. The request for a robust force at Abéché has come from Chad, the Central African Republic, from the UN high commission for refugees, from human rights and humanitarian organizations. Why aren't we further along? Why hasn't the European Union been more effective in pushing, with French leadership, for a force to eastern Chad?

A: I think because when the European Union has to move with this kind of issue it always takes some time because there is not a strong attaché a strong culture in favor of moving with soldiers in this kind of difficult situations. It takes time. I moist probably it will we will have a force there increasing but all the discussions I confess it to you are taking a lot of time. I don't know why, there is a kind of reluctant to send soldiers to these kinds of situations. It is not so easy.

Q: It is not so easy. To the contrary, it is very very difficult.

A: But our public opinions are not any more in the habit of exposing soldiers in these kind of missions and that's one of the problems in the European Union. We have no European real defense police. And that's a real problem, and we are working on that.

Q: What about the rapid deployment brigades that were to have been ready at least a year ago, as I understand it? Why aren't the rapid deployment forces ready?

A: I am not in charge of that. You must ask Solana. I am not in charge of this kind of confidence. I am humanitarian, I'm the development commissioner, in charge also with the political dialogue with the [unintelligible], I cannot give you, I am not allowed in fact, to give you a

position on that.

Q: Well, perhaps you can comment on the statement—

A: Now I would like to finish the discussion because I have a flight to take. Maybe one question more because it's really, really would speak a lot more with you but I have to go.

Q: Javier Solana said that the so called African Union plus reflects in his words "much progress". Would you agree that what emerged from the Addis Ababa high level consultation of November 16 did in fact reflect much progress given that the cost was the permanent loss of resolution 1706 which provided a robust force for protection in Darfur and along the border areas with Chad and Central African Republic?

A: I think there is a lot of progress made but in the same time we have also to put the African Union the best position in order to be credible and one of the questions is, is it possible for the African Union for a long time to stay committed to stay in charge with a lot of nations will they have the capacity or will they have quickly the capacity to deliver on this? And it is of course a main issue because if the African Union at some moment doesn't receive the capacity they need in order to be on all these fronts then there is problem of credibility at the end of the day for the African Union and that is very bad news for the international community because we need the African Union to be capital on delivering all of these issues.

Q: How can there be "much progress" if in fact security is deteriorating on the ground and all the information I get about the African Union and its capacity suggests the African Union is now deteriorating? How can we have much progress even as there is a deterioration of security on the ground?

A: Yes, this leads me to another, a more general note. I think we need, not to do it now, but we need permanent African troops, well trained, and also positioned in some areas in Africa, pre-positioned in areas in Africa, in order to have the capacity very quickly to engage. But, uh, we didn't succeed until now—

Q: Oh, I couldn't agree more about the need for—and I do believe the African Union is the future of peacekeeping in Africa, but are we going to hold the people of Darfur and eastern Chad hostage?

A: No!

Q: There are some 4.5 conflict affected people in desperate need for security—

A: No!

Q: —that the African Union can't provide. What does it do for them if Solana say there's much progress when in fact on the ground things are deteriorating?

A: Yes, no, I don't think—Things are not deteriorating, I do not think—things may not be improving, but I do not think they are deteriorating. And all these discussions with Bashir and the international community the US the European Union and all these actors, all these discussions are not really helping. All these discussions are deteriorating the credit of the African Union also and are making things more difficult. I am not the solution, I can share with you the same concerns about all of this, but we are the solution for the moment. I think the solution is in a very strong pressure on Khartoum, okay?

Q: OK, where does that pressure come from? You said that it can't be economic sanctions, where does the pressure come from?

A: I think the political position and the political statement of the European Union can be a pressure.

Q: No, Khartoum has never responded to mere statements.

A: But if you want to make the answers in my place you can do it, you say no, I think that all this story with the Sudanese government started not in the best conditions. And a lot of misunderstandings. And there are a lot of frustrations. Maybe we have to, we have the means to put the pressure, but if you ask me are the commercial sanctions effective and are the efficient, I will tell you I don't believe in economic sanctions. This is my position. You have another position, I have mine. I don't believe in that.

Q: I speak to human organizations all the time. They tell me security is in fact deteriorating.

A: And I believe that. Look—And I believe that. And I was the first to have declared that the situation in Darfur never was never as awful as it was now, since 2003, never the situation was so deteriorated as it was now. And that's the reason that I spoke directly and physically to Bashir about that and I had a quarrel with him about that because I couldn't accept his answer, saying that it was not true and so on. And so, and I know there are links between the Janjaweed and Bashir, and I know all this, and I even know the reason is that, most probably, Bashir still thinks that the military options is the best option, and we are denouncing all this, and we are telling him all this, and we are saying all this, excuse me, but at the same time we have no real means to put all the pressure on them. We cannot do

that.

Q: So in your view the European Union has no effective means of pressure other than political statement.

A: We have political statements, yes, we have also positive sanctions, we have continuing with very strong financial help for the south, for instance, and for the north, we are working a lot on this—

Q: But that doesn't put pressure on Khartoum to allow in meaningful forces.

A: Look—

Q: The problem with the African Union plus is that it has been tailored to meet Khartoum's requirements. And Khartoum's requirements are that this be a force that cannot do the job. The reason the security continues to---

A: Maybe, maybe but—

Q: Is because the force that Khartoum will allow cannot possibly do the job. So I do not know where Solana sees this "much progress" emerging from the Addis Ababa high level consultation.

A: Well, I thank you very much for the this very long speech, but maybe there is another idea I have, maybe we can also find a new and broader agenda to speak with Khartoum, trying also to tackle the problem he has, problems I know he has some frustration about the pressure we put on the rebels, maybe he has some problem with that. Maybe I know, you speak about sanctions, I know he has some frustrations towards the commercial embargo, what about the sovereignty of Sudan? You cannot make him believe—I think he's wrong, but you cannot make him believe that behind the UN mission there is in fact an attempt to change the regime. You cannot change his mind about that. So maybe it can be useful if we can speak about these worries he has.

Q: If we're talki—

A: Excuse me sir, excuse me sir, I really appreciate such a frank conversation, but now I am really obliged to go. I would like to speak with you, I am ready to speak with you for longer time. We can call together and the next time I come I would be very interested in meeting with you and having a meeting with you. I really appreciate, I like this kind of tough discussions, really, but now I am really obliged to go.