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Boy's Wish: Kill Them All

By Nicholas D. Kristof

GOZ BEIDA, Chad

“If I had a gun,” Ismail Hassan said venomously from his hospital bed, “I would shoot Arabs.”

“Surely not women and children?” I remonstrated.

“Every one of them,” Ismail snarled.

Ismail is a 15-year-old boy, and that conversation underscores how Chad is falling off a cliff, with escalating hatreds, violence and insecurity. He is a member of one of the black African tribes now being hunted down by the Sudanese-sponsored janjaweed Arab militia, at first in Darfur alone and now in Chad as well.

After the janjaweed attacked his village and shot his father, Ismail raced forward to cover his father's body with his own. That courage didn't move the janjaweed, who simply shot Ismail as well.

The genocide that started in Darfur in 2003 is now threatening to topple the governments of Chad and the Central African Republic. If these two countries collapse into chaos and civil war for years to come, then neighboring countries like Cameroon and Niger will be threatened as well — and the death toll triggered by the Darfur genocide will eventually number in the millions.

None of this was — or is — inevitable. In late 2003 and early 2004, some Republican appointees in the Bush administration (particularly in the Agency for International Development) were among the first to push for a government response to the slaughter in Darfur, but the White House wasn't interested.

Then in 2004, Colin Powell boldly used the “genocide” label to describe Darfur, over initial Pentagon and White House objections, and several of his aides drafted a set of policy options to confront the genocide. Those included pushing the French to use fighter aircraft from their base in Chad to intimidate the janjaweed, pushing Egypt to be more involved, recruiting peacekeeping troops from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and generally using American diplomatic muscle to push harder for a solution.

None of those things happened, partly because of reluctance from the White House and Pentagon, and partly because of resistance from France and other countries. So the genocide in Darfur has steadily expanded.

Arabs here in Chad repeatedly complain now that the black Africans steal their cattle, poison their wells, occupy their land, and shoot at them. I don't see much basis to those charges, for the Arabs have assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades (supplied by the Sudanese), while the black Africans have bows and arrows, but this narrative is widely held among Arabs.

"We consider them our enemies and they consider us their enemies," said Brahim Wadia, the patriarch of a group of Arabs who were grazing their cattle on what had been a black African farm. "So each side will shoot the other and kill the other."

Mr. Brahim and most members of his entourage were light-skinned, and they were civil to me (considering it white solidarity?). But that same morning nearby, several black Africans who tried to recover food from their burned and abandoned village were shot dead.

One person in Mr. Brahim's party was a boy of about 13 with black skin who looked unlike the others. He appeared physically unable to speak, and it wasn't clear if he had been hired as a herdsman or captured in a raid and enslaved.

The most common question I get from readers about Darfur is: What can I do? The simplest answer is to write or call the White House and members of Congress. (See how your representative does on the issue at www.darfurscores.org). Imagine if Mr. Bush had made Darfur an important issue at the Asian summit meeting last week, if he had returned via Cairo for a meeting with Arab leaders, if he had dispatched Condi Rice to Chad to shore it up.

Beyond pushing our own government, we can write the embassies of countries like France and Egypt that could play especially crucial roles. The same is true of China, which provides Sudan the guns used to shoot children like Ismail. We in the news business, including Arab and European television networks, could use a few pokes to appreciate that genocide is newsworthy.

The heroic efforts of aid groups in Darfur and Chad — 13 aid workers have been killed in Darfur since May — deserve support as well. (I list some groups active in Darfur in my blog, nytimes.com/ontheground.) The aid workers risk their lives daily to try to save people, putting up with janjaweed, scorpions, camel spiders and pit toilets inhabited by bats. They can use our backup.

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