

ANNOUNCEMENT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

CHEADLE/PRENDERGAST OP-ED

The Darfur Genocide

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As we sat in a refugee camp in Chad listening to Fatima describe how most of her family was killed by Sudanese government-sponsored Janjaweed militias, we found it incomprehensible that the world could not muster the political will necessary to protect her surviving family members or to hold the killers accountable.

Since returning from our visit to Chad and Darfur in late January, we have pored over the rationales the U.S. government has used for its tepid response, and have found no fewer than 10 lame excuses.

First, when former Secretary of State Colin Powell famously called what was happening in Darfur "genocide," he said we were already doing all we could to counter it. In the six months since he and President Bush used the term, however, not one punitive measure has been imposed on the orchestrator of the atrocities -- the Sudanese regime. And as the African Union (AU) struggles to deploy 2,000 troops to Darfur, a region the size of France, the French government recently announced that it will deploy 41,000 police in Paris if it is chosen as the Olympics site for 2012. Doing all we can?

Second, U.S. officials say that if they pressure the regime any harder, it would implode and the consequences would be grave. Graver than what this administration has called genocide? Regardless, this is specious, as the regime is one of the strongest governments in Africa and in no danger of collapse.

Third, U.S. officials have said since the beginning of the Darfur war that they needed to first focus on nailing a deal between the regime in Khartoum and southern-based rebels, which would in turn have immediate and positive impacts on the situation in Darfur. This approach led Khartoum to delay signing until the beginning of this year; since then the situation in Darfur has only deteriorated.

Fourth, the U.S. has repeatedly said, to its credit, that justice must be done for the crimes that have been committed in Darfur. But it has sliced the legs out from under that sentiment by opposing referral of the Darfur case to the International Criminal Court, the ideal locus for timely and cost-effective accountability.

Fifth, the U.S. has said that the Darfurian rebels, not the government, have recently been the biggest obstacle to forward movement. Evidence of continued government aerial bombing and Janjaweed raping has largely silenced this excuse.

Sixth, U.S. officials say the deployment of the AU troops is all that is needed. But AU monitors in Darfur themselves say they are largely spectators in the face of continuing atrocities, and every Darfurian we talked to on the ground believes a much larger force with a much stronger mandate is needed to truly protect civilians.

Seventh, the U.S. and its fellow donor nations focus mostly in their public statements on how much emergency aid is being provided, not saying that these are just humanitarian band-aids being applied over gaping human rights wounds.

Eighth, the U.S. often argues that it cannot do more because China and Russia will veto more potent multilateral action on Darfur. But no one has tested this threat. It is time to play diplomatic chicken with Beijing and Moscow. The U.S. and U.K. should press for a vote on a strong U.N. Resolution with real consequences and dare anyone to support crimes against humanity by vetoing it.

Ninth, the U.S. has argued that constructive engagement needs to be employed with Khartoum, rather than a punitive and isolationist approach. However, tough policy has a proven track record with the Sudanese regime: In the 1990s, the Security Council briefly punished Sudan for its support of terrorism, and the regime quickly changed its behavior. Despite this evidence the Security Council has dithered over the past two years to sanction the regime as the crisis in Darfur has intensified. This week's move by the U.S. to repackage a resolution it's tabled since mid-February will only delay action in Darfur further.

Tenth, and most insidiously, the U.S. is arguing that the circumstances in Darfur are actually getting better. Facing increased incidences of rape and pillage, continuing aerial attacks, and, worst, a credible threat of famine, most Darfurians would beg to differ.

So what is the real reason why the U.S. has not responded as it should have? The truth is that combating crimes against humanity is simply not considered a national security issue. We don't want to burn our leverage on Sudan in the face of issues such as Iraq, Iran and Syria.

The only antidote to this searing truth -- the only way the U.S. will take the kind of leadership necessary to end the horrors for Fatima and her people -- is for there to be a political cost to inaction. As American citizens increasingly raise their voices and write their letters about Darfur, the temperature has indeed risen. But not enough. We need to make it a little warmer, a little more uncomfortable for those politicians who would look away. Just a few more degrees. Just a few more thousand letters. It is, frankly, that simple.

**Don Cheadle was nominated for an Academy Award for his role in Hotel Rwanda.
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