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A Choice for Darfur

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DAVOS, Switzerland

Over the next two days, African leaders will convene in Ethiopia and choose a new head of the African Union. Incredibly, that job may go to Sudan's blood-drenched president, Omar al-Bashir, architect of the genocide in Darfur.

The outcome is still uncertain, with Sudan campaigning furiously for the job, but it's mind-boggling that African countries would even consider selecting as their leader a man who has systematically dispatched militias that pick out babies on the basis of tribe and skin color and throw them into bonfires.

At a time when Africa is enjoying solid economic growth and improved leadership, this self-inflicted wound would sully Africa's image and make it far more difficult for African Union peacekeepers to save lives in Darfur.

Mr. Bashir hasn't confined himself to killing his own people, but has also sent his janjaweed militias to invade Chad and the Central African Republic. The janjaweed have beaten mothers with their own babies, until the infants are dead, and lately they have diversified into gouging out people's eyes with bayonets. For anyone who wants the best for Africa, it is repulsive to think of President Bashir as the duly elected spokesman for the continent.

One reason Mr. Bashir has continued to engage in such behavior is that the world doesn't seriously object. Almost all North African countries are backing his bid to chair the African Union. China, which supplies nearly all the AK-47s that are used to kill children in Darfur, has underwritten the genocide. Lately, it has encouraged Sudan to be more responsible, but President Hu Jintao is visiting Sudan shortly — let's see whether he publicly expresses concern about Chinese-supported atrocities in Africa that far exceed the Rape of Nanjing.

Sudan promised a cease-fire, but instead it has been attacking aid workers. As Newsweek reported, at least four female aid workers have been beaten and sexually abused recently — raped in the case of two French women.

In addition, an aid worker in Sudan tells me that on Jan. 22 the police raided a party in the city of Nyala and arrested 22 employees of aid groups. Several were beaten and one woman was sexually abused but managed to fend off an attempted rape.

Broader security is also collapsing. On a road near Bulbul that used to be safe, gunmen stopped a public bus in the middle of the day and brutally beat the men and gang-raped

the women for hours. In the face of all this, aid workers are jittery and some are pulling out.

Yet Europe is oblivious (the Davos conference here has great sessions on Africa but nothing on Darfur). President Bush has been better than most world leaders, but still pathetic: he mustered half a sentence in his State of the Union address. Perhaps this is because Mr. Bush regards the situation as tragic but hopeless, but in fact there is plenty he could do.

He could speak out forcefully about Darfur. He could bring victims to the White House for a photo op. He could help the U.N. send a force to protect Chad and the Central African Republic — while continuing to push for U.N. peacekeepers in Darfur itself. He could visit Darfur or Chad and invite European or Chinese officials to join him. He could invite African leaders to Washington for a summit meeting that would include discussion of Darfur. He could impose a no-fly zone. He could develop targeted sanctions against Sudanese leaders. He could begin forensic accounting to find assets of those leaders in Western countries. He could call on NATO and the Pentagon to prepare contingency plans in case the janjaweed start massacring the hundreds of thousands of Darfuris in camps.

And this weekend he could telephone a few African presidents to tell them what a catastrophe it would be if Africa chose Mr. Bashir as its leader.

Serious negotiations between the government and Darfur's rebels are crucial for a lasting peace deal in Darfur, and new discussions are expected soon (that may be why President Hu dares visit Khartoum). But Mudawi Ibrahim Adam, a Sudanese human rights leader, says the new talks will fail unless the Darfur rebels have a chance to consult first. And when they try to meet, the Sudanese government bombs them.

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