

December 9, 2006

Annan Decries Failure to Halt Darfur Killings

Passivity of Most Governments Faulted

By Colum Lynch

UNITED NATIONS — U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan scolded governments Friday for failing to halt mass murder in Darfur, saying that the world has not learned the lessons of Rwanda and Srebrenica, where genocidal killings in the early 1990s defied the global ability to stop it.

"Sixty years after the liberation of the Nazi death camps, and 30 years after the Cambodian killing fields, the promise of 'never again' is ringing hollow," Annan said in his final speech on human rights as the U.N. leader.

Annan said the failure to protect civilians in the Sudanese region marked a low point in recent U.N. history. In a speech organized by Human Rights Watch in honor of International Human Rights Day, he faulted the "shameful passivity of most governments" in the face of a government-backed military campaign that has driven more than 2 million people from their homes and killed hundreds of thousands.

Annan provided a gloomy assessment of the organization's performance in confronting abusers of human rights during his 10-year tenure. He charged that the U.S.-led fight against terrorism has helped erode human rights standards. He said the United Nations needs to pursue an "an anti-terrorism strategy that does not merely pay lip service to the defense of human rights but is built on it."

Human rights activists have credited Annan, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, with advocating human rights more aggressively than any of his predecessors. But his legacy has been clouded by his own failure, as the head of the U.N. peacekeeping department, to promote a tougher response to the mass killings in Rwanda and Srebrenica.

Annan said his tenure has been marked by some important innovations, citing the creation of war crimes courts in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone and Cambodia, as well as the establishment of the International Criminal Court. The Hague-based court is preparing for the possible prosecution of Sudanese perpetrators of the Darfur killings.

But he said the initial work of the new Human Rights Council, established this year by the U.N. General Assembly to hold the world's tyrants and dictators to account, has been discouraging.

The Geneva-based rights body has focused almost all its attention on condemning Israel's human rights record while remaining silent about rights abuses in Darfur, Burma and

elsewhere. Annan said he hopes the council will confront Sudan in a special session on Darfur.

"The United Nations has a special stake, and a special responsibility, in promoting respect for human rights worldwide," he said. "I don't need to tell you that the U.N. has often failed to live up to that responsibility."

Annan made clear that he believes the U.N. membership bears the chief responsibility. He reserved some of his harshest criticism for Third World governments that, he said, have mischaracterized the U.N. human rights agenda as "a conspiracy by imperialist powers to take back the hard-won national sovereignty of formerly colonized people."

He also took an indirect swipe at China and Islamic governments that have defended Sudan. China, which relies on Sudan for oil, has repeatedly blocked U.S.-backed efforts to punish Sudan for rights abuses.

"There is more than enough blame to go around," Annan said. "It can be shared among those who value abstract notions of sovereignty more than the lives of real families, those whose reflex of solidarity puts them on the side of governments and not of peoples, and those who fear that action to stop the slaughter would jeopardize their commercial interests."

Annan said two pillars of U.S. counterterrorism strategy—clandestine prisons and the promotion of tougher interrogation methods—are playing into the hands of terrorists and ceding the moral high ground. "Secret prisons have no place in our struggle against terrorism," he said.

A U.S. official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the United States has an obligation to prosecute the fight against terrorism. "We are doing everything we can to make sure human rights are protected, always," the official said.

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