

"Without Help, A Million Could Die in Darfur," The International Herald Tribune, June 10, 2004

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"Without help, a million could die in Darfur"

Eric Reeves
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"An urgent crisis in Sudan"

NORTHAMPTON, Massachusetts The human catastrophe that the Sudanese government has engineered in Sudan's western province of Darfur is worsening daily. The head of the U.S. Agency for International Development, Andrew Natsios, recently declared, "If we get relief in, we could lose a third of a million. If we do not, it could be a million."

Present evidence suggests that relief will not get in. The government in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, is continuing to obstruct aid and is refusing to end violence by its marauding Arab militia allies, the Janjaweed, against Darfur's African tribespeople, thousands of whom have been driven into concentration camps.

In short, genocide is unfolding, with numbers that may exceed those in Rwanda, and nothing is being done to ensure "we get relief in." What can stop this ghastly reprise of the moral failure of 1994?

The UN Security Council has hesitated for months to respond to the Darfur crisis. In recent weeks, as some response became inevitable, Darfur occasioned only a generic expression of "grave concern."

But while concern within the Security Council is reportedly growing, there is no clear movement toward the only action that will get relief in: humanitarian intervention. Such intervention must provide military protection to ensure the safe movement of emergency humanitarian food, medical supplies and personnel. It must entail militarily securing the concentration camps that are now filled with terribly vulnerable and traumatized populations.

Not to act is to acquiesce in genocide - to fail to prevent Khartoum's deliberate efforts to bring about "conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of groups in whole or in part," to quote the 1948 UN Genocide Convention. Regular military and Janjaweed forces have relentlessly targeted the civilians within these African groups, perceived by Khartoum as supporters of the African insurgents who have been fighting the government.

Water systems, food stocks and agricultural tools have been destroyed, cattle looted, thousands of villages burned, men executed, women and girls gang-raped. The United Nations estimates that one million people who have been driven from their homes remain displaced within Sudan and another 200,000 have fled across the border to Chad.

The response to this genocide must be guided by a sense of overwhelming urgency, given the extreme vulnerability of vast displaced populations. Hundreds of thousands of lives depend upon the international

community's ability to provide unfettered assistance.

The Khartoum regime has proved resourceful in varying its obstructionist tactics. Under these circumstances humanitarian intervention is demanded.

Such intervention will require internationalizing the rail line from Port Sudan, through Khartoum, and on to Darfur in the west. Without rail transport, humanitarian capacity will be seriously inadequate. Urgent rail repairs and spare train parts (presently embargoed by the United States), as well as military protection, will be required. Planning for securing and operating the rail line must begin immediately.

Military planners advising the United Nations must also quickly calculate the number of troops required to liberate camps currently without any international humanitarian presence. Next, all camps should be brought fully under UN control to ensure the humanitarian access that, according to the United Nations, Khartoum has "systematically" denied.

The United Nations must pass a resolution authorizing intervention by mid-June. This should, as the advocacy group Human Rights Watch recently argued, have the military authority of Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

It is likely, however, that the United Nations will fail to act. So those countries that are contracting parties to the UN convention on genocide are morally and legally obliged to begin planning now how they will prevent further genocide in Darfur.

The chances of immediate intervention in Darfur appear slim. As in Rwanda, much can be traced to variously motivated refusals to use the word genocide, substituting in its place the term "ethnic cleansing." As Samantha Power, author of a history of genocide, has suggested, "ethnic cleansing" is ultimately "a euphemistic halfway house," a reflection of indecision.

Darfur permits no halfway measures, not when hundreds of thousands of lives are imperiled. Genocidal destruction requires urgent planning for humanitarian intervention - and it should begin now.

[Eric Reeves, a professor at Smith College, has written and published extensively on Sudan.]