


"Humanitarian intervention in Darfur?", April 17, 2005

By Eric Reeves

New York Times

April 17, 2005

(781 total words in this text)

(63 Reads) 

EXTANT MORTALITY data strongly suggest that genocide in the Darfur region of western Sudan has now claimed approximately 400,000 lives. Ethnically targeted human destruction, directed by the National Islamic Front regime in Khartoum against African tribal populations of the region, has also displaced well over 2 million, and left 3 million in need of humanitarian assistance.

Though shamefully deferred, the question of international humanitarian intervention in Darfur can no longer be avoided. Without such intervention---including all necessary military support and a robust mandate for civilian protection---extreme insecurity amid rapidly accelerating famine conditions will push the genocidal death toll much higher. UN humanitarian chief Jan Egeland has predicted that mortality rates could climb to 100,000 people a month if insecurity forces humanitarian organizations to suspend work.

The present partial contingent of 2,200 African Union cease-fire monitors and protection forces has taken six months to deploy (the original target figure was 3,500). A proposed increase to 6,000---still far from adequate for the security tasks in Darfur---could not be completed until late summer, even accepting an optimistic African Union assessment. Moreover, African Union forces have serious deficiencies, not only in numbers but in transport capacity, communications, intelligence, as well as logistics and administrative resources.

Most consequentially, the African Union has been unable to secure from Khartoum a mandate for civilian protection. The mission is tasked only with monitoring a cease-fire that has virtually no meaning and doesn't include the Janjaweed, Khartoum's now notoriously brutal militia proxy in Darfur.

The African Union force alone is all too clearly vastly inadequate to the urgent needs for civilian protection in Darfur. But because the UN is so unlikely to provide auspices for an effective intervening force, the international community has expediently allowed the African Union to serve as a default policy. Recent Security Council resolutions on Darfur, as well as comments from the UN political leadership, only highlight the improbability of UN-mandated humanitarian intervention.

But the current African Union deployment can't conceal the continuing deterioration of security for both civilians and humanitarian operations. Moreover, there is now compelling evidence that Khartoum has begun to organize more targeted attacks on humanitarian aid workers, part of an ongoing policy of hindering relief operations in this vast region. The recent shooting of a worker for the US Agency for International Development grimly highlights the regime's tactics.

Humanitarian intervention in Darfur should be defined by security needs, not the capacity of the African Union or the political limitations of the UN. Scores of large camps for displaced persons must have secure perimeters that allow women and girls to search for firewood, water, and animal fodder without fear of rape by the Janjaweed; humanitarian corridors and convoys must be provided all necessary protection; safe passage must be created for hundreds of thousands of Darfuris trapped in inaccessible rural areas and beyond humanitarian reach; those wishing to return to the sites of their former villages and resume agriculturally productive lives must have security; and the Janjaweed militia must be cantoned and eventually disarmed (as futilely demanded by UN Security Council Resolution 1556, July 30, 2004).

There are clear risks to such intervention, and to the Western military resources and personnel that alone

can enable African Union forces to become truly effective. There are highly credible reports of Saudi, Yemeni, Jordanian, and Iraqi nationals in training camps in Darfur -- certainly with Khartoum's knowledge. Attacks on civilians and humanitarian workers in the early stages of intervention present a clear risk, and a highly mobile, well-armed early contingent of troops must be deployed to counter such threats. Khartoum must also be put on notice that it will be held fully and immediately accountable for attacks on civilians by its own forces and its paramilitary allies. Similarly, the Darfuri insurgency groups may attempt to take military advantage of any intervention; they, too, must be put on notice that any actions impeding efforts to protect civilians and humanitarian workers will be met forcefully.

There are other risks to what would be a large, expensive, and long-term deployment in a forbidding region. But as the third year of genocidal conflict grinds on, let us be clear about the costs of inaction or further pretense that the African Union alone can respond adequately to this vast episode in deliberate human destruction. Hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians will die. They are as vulnerable to the consequences of insecurity, famine, disease, and the Janjaweed as the Tutsis and moderate Hutus of Rwanda were vulnerable to the violence inspired by the Interahamwe. The 11th anniversary of the terrible events of 1994 only makes more conspicuous our failure, again, to intervene.

[Eric Reeves is a professor at Smith College]

© Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company