

The Mournful Math of Darfur: The Dead Don't Add Up

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KHARTOUM, Sudan - Darfur's dead have been tossed into the bottoms of wells, dumped into mass graves, interred in sandy cemeteries and crudely cremated. Children have been snatched from the arms of their mothers and thrown into fires, villagers dragged on the ground behind horses and camels by ropes strung around their necks.

All of which makes the important and politically charged task of counting the precise number of victims of the two-plus years of war in western Sudan a virtually impossible exercise.

Is the death toll between 60,000 and 160,000, as Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick told reporters during a recent trip to the region?

Or is it closer to the roughly 400,000 dead reported recently by the Coalition for International Justice, a Washington-based nongovernmental organization that was hired by the United States Agency for International Development to try to determine whether the killing amounts to genocide. (Former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell called the Darfur killing genocide last year, but Mr. Zoellick has studiously avoided the issue.) The State Department has said the higher mortality figures offered by some groups are "skewed" by overestimates of the number of deaths from violence in Darfur, rather than from disease and other causes.

Those trying to tally the terror are engaging in guesswork for a cause. They say they are trying to count the deaths to shock the world into stopping the number from rising higher than it already is. Sudan has not issued an estimate of its own, although officials in Khartoum label the numbers floating around as propaganda.

With death certificates nonexistent, census figures hopelessly out of date and much of Darfur's population uprooted from its home villages and scattered into makeshift settlements and camps, the only feasible way to count is through broad-brush statistical analysis.

To the survivors, the various estimates are impossible to grasp. In the middle of the mayhem, they often had no idea how many people were slain in their own tiny villages when the government-backed militias, known as the janjaweed, swept in full of so much fury.

"So many died," Ibrahim Adam Abdallah said simply, his face blank, when asked how many lives were lost in Seraf, a settlement in South Darfur that was first emptied a year ago and set on fire in April, to ensure that no one ever goes home.

John Hogan, the John D. MacArthur professor of sociology and law at Northwestern University who led the compilation of the numbers for the Coalition for International Justice, argues that devising a death toll for Darfur is worth the effort, even if it is a rough approximation. "To focus the attention of people, it's important to give them some sense of the scale of what's happening in Darfur," he said.

Error is inevitable, Mr. Hogan acknowledged. "Obviously, this is not correct to the person, or even the 10 or the 100," he said. "But it's much better to have information of some kind - and this is a good estimate - than no information."

Whatever the actual figure, it is undoubtedly a moving target. People are still dying from sickness, starvation and exposure at rates that experts say are higher than the already elevated rates at which they died before the conflict began in early 2003. And although Darfur has long been known for its lawlessness, violent deaths are regarded as far higher than normal, as well.

Totaling up the dead in Africa's wars has always been particularly challenging, from the mass killing in Rwanda (in which somewhere around 800,000 people died) to the continuing war in Congo (where the toll is now estimated to be in the neighborhood of 3.8 million).

The continued insecurity in Darfur and the rugged nature of the vast battlefield make counting its dead a particularly error-prone exercise.

The World Health Organization looked into the health consequences last year when it estimated that 70,000 people had died over a seven-month period from malnutrition and disease linked to the conflict.

Researchers for the Coalition for International Justice then released their more comprehensive review. They were not able to get into Sudan, but under an American government contract they managed to conduct 1,136 interviews with refugees in eastern Chad, asking them whether they had family members who had died in violent circumstances or were missing.

From this survey, the coalition's researchers established a death rate of 1.2 per 10,000, which is alarmingly high. Applying that figure to the estimated number of displaced people in Chad, the coalition concluded that 142,944 people may have been killed by government forces or allied militias, the main groups ravaging the civilian population.

The figure is rough. It assumes that every missing relative has died, which will surely not prove true. It assumes that the death rate among relatives of the refugees in Chad is similar to the rate among those who remained in Darfur, which may or may not be accurate.

The Coalition for International Justice then took the W.H.O. study and - assuming that same number of people died in the beginning of the conflict from sickness as two years later - projected the death estimates for the entire Darfur war. The total number of health-related deaths came to 253,619, for a grand total of 396,563 deaths.

In its attempt to determine whether the killing amounted to genocide, the United Nations International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur conducted extensive interviews in all three Darfur states and studied numerous raids in minute detail. In some cases, the commission reported the number of militiamen who swept into a village, the number of government bombers flying overhead and the number of corpses left behind.

Despite such precision, the commission made no attempt to come up with a Darfur-wide death toll. In fact, commissioners found that totaling up the number of damaged villages in Darfur was difficult enough. Estimates range from 700 to well over 2,000.

Still, the counting continues, and eventually, when Darfur's violence mercifully ends, a number will be agreed upon. That number, like the figure of 800,000 for the Rwanda massacre, will be forever appended to the awful events. The rest of the world, slow to react to Darfur, will then have plenty of opportunity to think about it, and wonder why it was able to grow as large as it did.