

Never Again, Again?

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TAMA, Sudan

So who killed 2-year-old Zahra Abdullah for belonging to the Fur tribe?

At one level, the answer is simple: The murderers were members of the janjaweed militia that stormed into this mud-brick village in the South Darfur region at dawn four weeks ago on horses, camels and trucks. Zahra's mother, Fatima Omar Adam, woke to gunfire and smoke and knew at once what was happening.

She jumped up from her sleeping mat and put Zahra on her back, then grabbed the hands of her two older children and raced out of her thatch-roof hut with her husband.

Some of the marauders were right outside. They yanked Zahra from Ms. Fatima's back and began bludgeoning her on the ground in front of her shrieking mother and sister. Then the men began beating Ms. Fatima and the other two children, so she grabbed them and fled - and the men returned to beating the life out of Zahra.

At another level, responsibility belongs to the Sudanese government, which armed the janjaweed and gave them license to slaughter and rape members of several African tribes, including the Fur.

Then some responsibility attaches to the rebels in Darfur. They claim to be representing the tribes being ethnically cleansed, but they have been fighting each other instead of negotiating a peace with the government that would end the bloodbath.

And finally, responsibility belongs to the international community - to you and me - for acquiescing in yet another genocide.

Tama is just the latest of many hundreds of villages that have been methodically destroyed in the killing fields of Darfur over the last two years. Ms. Fatima sat on the ground and told me her story - which was confirmed by other eyewitnesses - in a dull, choked monotone, as she described her guilt at leaving her child to die.

"Zahra was on the ground, and they were beating her with sticks, but I ran away," she said. Her 4-year-old son, Adam, was also beaten badly but survived. A 9-year-old daughter, Khadija, has only minor injuries but she told me that she had constant nightmares about the janjaweed.

At least Ms. Fatima knows what happened to her daughter. A neighbor, Aisha Yagoub Abdurahman, is beside herself because she says she saw her 10-year-old son Adil carried off by the janjaweed. He is still missing, and everyone knows that the janjaweed regularly enslave children like him, using them as servants or sexual playthings. In all, 37 people were killed in Tama, and another 12 are missing.

The survivors fled five miles to another village that had been abandoned after being attacked by the janjaweed a year earlier. Now the survivors are terrified, and they surrounded me to ask for advice about how to stay alive.

None of them dared accompany me back to Tama, which is an eerie ghost town, doors hanging off hinges and pots and sandals strewn about. The only inhabitants I saw in Tama were camels, which are now using the village as a pasture - and which the villagers say belong to the janjaweed. On the road back, I saw a group of six janjaweed, one displaying his rifle.

Darfur is just the latest chapter in a sorry history of repeated inaction in the face of genocide, from that of Armenians, through the Holocaust, to the slaughter of Cambodians, Bosnians and Rwandans. If we had acted more resolutely last year, then Zahra would probably still be alive.

Attacks on villages like Tama occur regularly. Over the last week, one tribe called the Falata, backed and armed by the Sudanese government, has burned villages belonging to the Masalit tribe south of here. Dozens of bodies are said to be lying unclaimed on the ground.

President Bush, where are you? You emphasize your willingness to speak bluntly about evil, but you barely let the word Darfur pass your lips. The central lesson of the history of genocide is that the essential starting point of any response is to bellow moral outrage - but instead, Mr. President, you're whispering.

In a later column, I'll talk more specifically about actions we should take, and it's true that this is a complex mess without easy solutions. But for starters we need a dose of moral clarity. For all the myriad complexities of Darfur, what history will remember is that this is where little girls were bashed to death in front of their parents because of their tribe - and because the world couldn't be bothered to notice.