

Osama's Crusade in Darfur

The New York Times

April 25, 2006

OP-ED COLUMNIST

By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](#)

Those of us who want a more forceful response to genocide in Darfur should be sobered by Osama bin Laden's latest tape.

In that tape, released on Sunday, Osama rails against the agreement that ended Sudan's civil war with its Christian and animist south and accuses the U.S. of plotting to dispatch "Crusader troops" to occupy Darfur "and steal its oil wealth under the pretext of peacekeeping." Osama calls on good Muslims to go to Sudan and stockpile land mines and rocket-propelled grenades in preparation for "a long-term war" against U.N. peacekeepers and other infidels.

Osama's tape underscores the fact that a tougher approach carries real risks. It's easy for us in the peanut gallery to call for a U.N. force, but what happens when jihad is start shooting down the U.N. helicopters?

So with a major rally planned for Sunday to call for action to stop the slaughter in Darfur, let's look at what specific actions the U.S. should take. One reader, William in Scottsdale, Ariz., wrote to me to say that he had called Senator John McCain's office to demand more action on Darfur. "The lady on the phone asked me for suggestions," he said — and William was short on suggestions.

The first step to stop the killing is to dispatch a robust U.N. peacekeeping force of at least 20,000 well-equipped and mobile troops. But because of precisely the nationalistic sensitivities that Osama is trying to stir, it shouldn't have U.S. ground troops. Instead, it should be made up mostly of Turks, Jordanians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and other Muslims, and smaller numbers of European and Asian troops. The U.S. can supply airlifts, and NATO can provide a short-term bridging force if necessary.

Second, the U.S. and France should enforce a no-fly zone from the French air base in Abéché, Chad. American military planners say this is practicable, particularly if it simply involves destroying Sudanese aircraft on the ground after they have attacked civilians.

Granted, these approaches carry real risks. After we shoot up a Sudanese military plane, Sudan may orchestrate a "spontaneous" popular riot that will involve lynching a few U.S. aid workers — or journalists.

But remember that the Sudanese government is hanging on by its fingernails. It is deeply unpopular, and when it tried to organize demonstrations against the Danish cartoons, they were a flop.

The coming issue of Foreign Policy magazine publishes a Failed States Index in which Sudan is ranked the single most unstable country in the entire world. If we apply enough pressure, Sudan's leaders will back down in Darfur — just as they did when they signed a peace deal to end the war with southern Sudan.

A no-fly zone and a U.N. force are among the ways we can apply pressure, but another essential element is public diplomacy. We should respond to Osama by shining a spotlight on the Muslim victims of Darfur (many Arabs have instinctively sided with Sudan's rulers and have no idea that nearly all of the victims of the genocide are Muslim).

The White House can invite survivors for a photo-op so they themselves can recount, in Arabic, how their children were beheaded and their mosques destroyed. We can release atrocity photos, like one I have from an African Union archive of the body of a 2-year-old boy whose face was beaten into mush. President Bush can make a major speech about Darfur, while sending Condi Rice and a planeload of television journalists to a refugee camp in Chad to meet orphans.

Madeleine Albright helped end the horrors of Sierra Leone simply by going there and being photographed with maimed children. Those searing photos put Sierra Leone on the global agenda, and policy makers hammered out solutions. Granted, it's the fault of the "CBS Evening News" that it gave Darfur's genocide only 2 minutes of coverage in all of last year (compared with the 36 minutes that it gave the Michael Jackson trial), but the administration can help when we in the media world drop the ball.

The U.S. could organize a summit meeting in Europe or the Arab world to call attention to Darfur, we could appoint a presidential envoy like Colin Powell, and we could make the issue much more prominent in our relations with countries like Egypt, Qatar, Jordan and China.

Americans often ask what they can do about Darfur. These are the kinds of ideas they can urge on the White House and their members of Congress — or on embassies like Egypt's. Many other ideas are at savedarfur.org and at genocideintervention.net.

When Darfur first came to public attention, there were 70,000 dead. Now there are perhaps 300,000, maybe 400,000. Soon there may be 1 million. If we don't act now, when will we?