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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The American Witness

By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](#)

American soldiers are trained to shoot at the enemy. They're prepared to be shot at. But what young men like Brian Steidle are not equipped for is witnessing a genocide but being unable to protect the civilians pleading for help.

If President Bush wants to figure out whether the U.S. should stand more firmly against the genocide in Darfur, I suggest that he invite Mr. Steidle to the White House to give a briefing. Mr. Steidle, a 28-year-old former Marine captain, was one of just three American military advisers for the African Union monitoring team in Darfur - and he is bursting with frustration.

"Every single day you go out to see another burned village, and more dead bodies," he said. "And the children - you see 6-month-old babies that have been shot, and 3-year-old kids with their faces smashed in with rifle butts. And you just have to stand there and write your reports."

While journalists and aid workers are sharply limited in their movements in Darfur, Mr. Steidle and the monitors traveled around by truck and helicopter to investigate massacres by the Sudanese government and the janjaweed militia it sponsors. They have sometimes been shot at, and once his group was held hostage, but they have persisted and become witnesses to systematic crimes against humanity.

So is it really genocide?

"I have no doubt about that," Mr. Steidle said. "It's a systematic cleansing of peoples by the Arab chiefs there. And when you talk to them, that's what they tell you. They're very blunt about it. One day we met a janjaweed leader and he said, 'Unless you get back four camels that were stolen in 2003, then we're going to go to these four villages and burn the villages, rape the women, kill everyone.' And they did."

The African Union doesn't have the troops, firepower or mandate to actually stop the slaughter, just to monitor it. Mr. Steidle said his single most frustrating moment came in December when the Sudanese government and the janjaweed attacked the village of Labado, which had 25,000 inhabitants. Mr. Steidle and his unit flew to the area in helicopters, but a Sudanese general refused to let them enter the village - and also refused to stop the attack.

"It was extremely frustrating - seeing the village burn, hearing gunshots, not being able to do anything," Mr. Steidle said. "The entire village is now gone. It's a big black spot on the earth."

When Sudan's government is preparing to send bombers or helicopter gunships to attack an African village, it shuts down the cellphone system so no one can send out warnings. Thus the international monitors know when a massacre is about to unfold. But there's usually nothing they can do.

The West, led by the Bush administration, is providing food and medical care that is keeping hundreds of thousands of people alive. But we're managing the genocide, not halting it.

"The world is failing Darfur," said Jan Egeland, the U.N. under secretary general for humanitarian affairs. "We're only playing the humanitarian card, and we're just witnessing the massacres."

President Bush is pushing for sanctions, but European countries like France are disgracefully cool to the idea - and China is downright hostile, playing the same supportive role for the Darfur genocide that it did for the Khmer Rouge genocide.

Mr. Steidle has just quit his job with the African Union, but he plans to continue working in Darfur to do his part to stand up to the killers. Most of us don't have to go to that extreme of risking our lives in Darfur - we just need to get off the fence and push our government off, too.

At one level, I blame President Bush - and, even more, the leaders of European, Arab and African nations - for their passivity. But if our leaders are acquiescing in genocide, that's because we citizens are passive, too. If American voters cared about Darfur's genocide as much as about, say, the Michael Jackson trial, then our political system would respond. One useful step would be the passage of the Darfur Accountability Act, to be introduced today by Senators Jon Corzine and Sam Brownback. The legislation calls for such desperately needed actions as expanding the African Union force and establishing a military no-fly zone to stop Sudan from bombing civilians.

As Martin Luther King Jr. put it: "Man's inhumanity to man is not only perpetrated by the vitriolic actions of those who are bad. It is also perpetrated by the vitiating inaction of those who are good."

[E-mail: nicholas@nytimes.com](mailto:nicholas@nytimes.com)