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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Remember Rwanda, but Take Action in Sudan

By SAMANTHA POWER

Ten years ago this week, Rwandan Hutu extremists embarked on a genocidal campaign in which they murdered some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus — a genocide more efficient than that of the Nazis.

On this anniversary, Western and United Nations leaders are expressing their remorse and pledging their resolve to prevent future humanitarian catastrophes. But as they do so, the Sudanese government is teaming up with Arab Muslim militias in a campaign of ethnic slaughter and deportation that has already left nearly a million Africans displaced and more than 30,000 dead. Again, the United States and its allies are bystanders to slaughter, seemingly no more prepared to prevent genocide than they were a decade ago.

The horrors in the Darfur region of Sudan are not "like" Rwanda, any more than those in Rwanda were "like" those ordered by Hitler. The Arab-dominated government in Khartoum has armed nomadic Arab herdsman, or Janjaweed, against rival African tribes. The government is using aerial bombardment to strafe villages and terrorize civilians into flight. And it is denying humanitarian access to some 700,000 people who are trapped in Darfur.

The Arab Muslim marauders and their government sponsors do not yet seem intent on exterminating every last African Muslim in their midst. But they do seem determined to wipe out black life in the region. The only difference between Rwanda and Darfur, said Mukesh Kapila, the former United Nations' humanitarian coordinator for Sudan, "is the numbers of dead, murdered, tortured, raped."

A radio exchange between a Sudanese ground commander and a pilot overhead (taped by a British journalist in February) captures the aims of the attackers:

Commander: We've found people still in the village.

Pilot: Are they with us or against us?

Commander: They say they will work with us.

Pilot: They're liars. Don't trust them. Get rid of them.

And later:

Pilot: Now the village is empty and secure for you. Any village you pass through you must burn. That way, when the villagers come back they'll have a surprise waiting for them.

The lessons of Rwanda are many. The first is that those intent on wiping out an inconvenient minority have a habit of denying journalists and aid workers access and of pursuing bad-faith negotiations. Thus far the Sudanese government has pursued both approaches, and Western officials have been far too trusting of their assurances.

A second lesson is that outside powers cannot wait for confirmation of genocide before they act. In 1994 the Clinton administration spent more time maneuvering to avoid using the term "genocide" than it did using its resources to save lives. In May 1994, an internal Pentagon memo warned against using the term "genocide" because it could commit the United States "to actually do something." In the case of Sudan, American officials need not focus on whether the killings meet the definition of genocide set by the 1948 Genocide Convention; they should focus instead on trying to stop them.

A third lesson is that even when the United States decides not to respond militarily, American leadership is indispensable. This is especially true because Europe continues to avoid intervening in violent humanitarian crises. And it remains true despite the Bush administration's unpopularity abroad. The United States often takes an all-or-nothing approach: if it doesn't send troops, it tends to foreclose other policy options.

In Sudan, this tendency has been compounded by the administration's reluctance to risk undermining the peace process it has spearheaded between Sudan's government and the rebels in the south. While President Bush is understandably eager to show he can make peace as well as war, he must stand up to Sudan's government during these difficult negotiations.

After all, regimes that resort to ethnic killing and deportation as a tool of statecraft rarely keep their word. An important predictor of Sudan's reliability as an ally in the war on terrorism and as a party to the American-brokered peace accord is its treatment of African Muslims in Darfur.

What would standing up to Sudan entail? The administration has several options.

On the economic and diplomatic front, the United States has already demonstrated its clout in Sudan, which is desperate to see American sanctions lifted. So far, Secretary of State Colin Powell has rightly described the humanitarian crisis as a "catastrophe." But the White House and the Pentagon have been mostly mute. President Bush must use American leverage to demand that the government in Khartoum cease its aerial attacks, terminate its arms supplies to the Janjaweed and punish those militia accused of looting, rape and murder. The president made a phone call last week to Sudan's president, Omar Hassan Ahmed al-Bashir, but one ritual conversation hardly counts as pressure. Mr. Bush should keep calling until humanitarian workers and investigators are permitted free

movement in the region, a no-fly zone is declared and the killings are stopped, and he should dispatch Mr. Powell to the Chad-Sudan border to signal America's resolve.

The Bush administration can't do this alone. Ten thousand international peacekeepers are needed in Darfur. President Bush will have to press Sudan to agree to a United Nations mission — and he will also need United Nations member states to sign on. The Europeans can help by urging the Security Council to refer the killings to the newly created International Criminal Court. Though the United States has been hostile to the court, this is one move it should not veto, as an investigation by the court could deter future massacres.

President Clinton has said that one of the greatest mistakes of his presidency was not doing more to prevent the Rwandan genocide. When he visited Rwanda in 1998, he tried to explain America's failure to respond: "It may seem strange to you here, especially the many of you who lost members of your family, but all over the world there were people like me sitting in offices, day after day after day, who did not fully appreciate the depth and the speed with which you were being engulfed by this unimaginable terror."

Today, roughly 1,000 miles north of Rwanda, tens of thousands of Africans are herded onto death marches, and Western leaders are again sitting in offices. How sad it is that it doesn't even seem strange.

Samantha Power is the author of "A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide," which won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction.