

July 9, 2006

OP-ED COLUMNIST

When Genocide Worsens

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A genocide by its nature would seem to be the rock bottom of human behavior. But in Darfur, we see a genocide that is growing worse.

The Darfur Peace Agreement, signed on May 5, signaled a ray of hope in a desperate land. But on the ground, its deadlines are not being met, security is deteriorating, and the violence is rippling from Sudan ever wider into both Chad and the Central African Republic.

One measure of how awful the situation has become in eastern Chad is that at least 15,000 villagers have fled ... into Darfur!

In one broad swath of the Chad border region, the only Westerners brave enough (and crazy enough) to stay are French doctors with Doctors Without Borders. Hats off to them.

In just the last six months, aid groups in eastern Chad have lost 26 vehicles to armed hijackers. A Spanish woman working for Unicef was shot and nearly killed in May when her vehicle was stolen — and the car was later spotted in Sudan, sailing through government checkpoints. This insecurity puts relief agencies in a terrible situation, for they don't want to risk having their aid workers murdered or raped, and yet if they pull out many thousands of Darfuris will die.

"We cannot play with the lives of our own staff beyond a certain limit," frets Jan Egeland, an under secretary general of the United Nations, adding, "Our people in the field are increasingly desperate."

"I think we're headed toward total chaos," he said. "Will we have collapse in nine days, nine weeks, nine months? I don't know. But the situation is unsustainable."

One problem is that provisions of the Darfur Peace Agreement aren't actually being carried out so far — and in the meantime it has inflamed tensions among the African tribes that have been victimized by the genocide. The Fur tribe, one of the biggest in Darfur ("Darfur" means "Homeland of the Fur"), has mostly opposed the deal, and so there has been fighting between Fur and men of the Zaghawa tribe, whose top commander signed the agreement.

"There is a significant risk that the Darfur Peace Agreement will collapse," the U.N. special envoy for Sudan, Jan Pronk, wrote in his blog. "The agreement does not resonate with the people of Darfur. ... It is not yet dead, but severely paralyzed."

Meanwhile, Sudan is as adamant as ever that it will never accept United Nations peacekeepers, and the international community isn't prepared to push back hard.

The two most important Bush administration officials on Darfur, Robert Zoellick and Michael Gerson (who has been the conscience of the White House), have both announced their resignations, so there is a vacuum in Washington as well. President Bush should address this vacuum by appointing a top-level envoy for the crisis. Mr. President, how about calling in James Baker, or else Colin Powell?

In talking to experts about Darfur over the last three years, I usually have encountered both optimists and pessimists. These days, I just can't find an optimist. The range of opinion is between those who think the crisis will deteriorate slowly and those who think the situation will disintegrate so precipitously that soon 100,000 people will be dying each month, unless the peace agreement can somehow be revived.

There are specific measures I can suggest. We need to amplify (though not reopen) the peace agreement to bring the Fur in, and we need to ensure that its deadlines are met. We need a U.N.-led or French-led protection force in eastern Chad. We need to bolster the African Union force in Darfur immediately and push harder for Sudan to admit U.N. peacekeepers. We need a no-fly zone. We need to press Europeans to become more involved and to remind Arabs that the slaughter of several hundred thousand Muslims in Darfur is every bit as worthy of protest as cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.

But most of all, we must put genocide squarely on the international agenda. One lesson of history is that world leaders always prefer to ignore a genocide, but when forced to face the horrors — as in Bosnia or Kosovo — they figure out ways of responding. The most acute need is not for policies but for political will.

So here's a suggestion: Let's charter a few cargo planes to carry the corpses of hundreds of new victims from Darfur and Chad to the U.N. The butchered victims of Darfur could lie in state as a memorial to global indifference — and as a spur to become serious about the first genocide of the 21st century.

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