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"Darfur: Ongoing Genocide"

by Eric Reeves

The insurgency in the Darfur region of western Sudan began virtually unnoticed in February 2003; it has over the past year precipitated the first great episode of genocidal destruction in the twenty-first century. The victims are the African tribal groups of Darfur, primarily the Fur, the Massaleit, and the Zaghawa. These people have long been politically and economically marginalized, and in recent years the National Islamic Front regime in Khartoum years has refused to control increasingly violent Arab militia raiding on African villages in Darfur. Competition between Arab and African tribal groups over the scarce primary resources in Darfur, arable land and water, has been exacerbated in recent decades by advancing desertification throughout the Sahel region. But it was Khartoum's failure to respond to the desperate economic needs of the region, the decayed judiciary, the lack of political representation, and in particular the growing impunity on the part of Arab raiders that finally precipitated armed conflict.

Not directly related to the twenty-one-year conflict in southern Sudan, Darfur's insurgency found early and remarkable success against Khartoum's regular military forces. But this success had a terribly ominous consequence, for the regime switched from a military strategy of direct confrontation to a policy of systematically destroying the Africa tribal groups perceived as the civilian base of support for the insurgents. The primary instrument in this new policy was the Janjaweed, a loosely organized Arab militia force of perhaps twenty thousand men, primarily on horse and camel.

This force was dramatically different in character, military strength, and purpose from previous militia raiders. Khartoum ensured that the Janjaweed were extremely heavily armed, well supplied, and actively coordinating with the regime's regular ground and air forces. Indeed, Human Rights Watch obtained in July 2004 confidential Sudanese government documents that directly implicated high-ranking government officials in a policy of support for the Janjaweed. "It's absurd to distinguish between the Sudanese government forces and the militias---they are one," said Peter Takirambudde, executive director of Human Rights Watch's Africa Division. "These documents show that militia activity has not just been condoned, it's been specifically supported by Sudan government officials."

The nature of the civilian destruction that began in late spring of 2003 is defined all too well by a key clause from the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which stipulates inter alia acts "deliberating inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." As the Janjaweed began systematically destroying many hundreds of villages throughout the three states of Darfur Province, it became increasingly clear that these were attacks indeed genocidal in nature. Water wells and irrigation systems were blown up or poisoned with corpses (extraordinarily destructive acts in the arid environments of Darfur); food- and seed-stocks were destroyed, along with agricultural implements and fruit trees; the donkeys critical to the sedentary agricultural economies of most of the African villages were killed, cattle looted and sold to the east. All that might make possible the resumption of agricultural life was destroyed.

Men and boys were killed, often in mass executions; women were raped, often brutally gang-raped, and deliberately scarred to make them undesirable as brides or mothers. A UN account from February 2004 offers a grim portrait of this ghastly criminal violence:

"In an attack on 27 February [2004] in the Tawilah area of northern Darfur, 30 villages were burned to the ground, over 200 people killed and over 200 girls and women raped---some by up to 14 assailants and in front of their fathers who were later killed. A further 150 women and 200 children were abducted."

Many fled from their villages, terrified and bereft of all belongings; an uncountable number died in flight, victims of Darfur's forbidding climate and terrain. Many were able to reach the Chad/Darfur border, and a population of more than two hundred thousand has now been settled in camps inside Chad, with conditions ranging from poor to appalling. Many more, perhaps more than half a million, are hiding in the vast and remote rural areas, slowly and invisibly starving (Darfur is roughly the size of France). An even greater number have fled to what can only be called concentration camps. The best of these are now the sites of rapidly growing malnutrition (see below), as well as breeding grounds for water-borne diseases that peak with the height of the rainy season in August. The worst of the camps are little more than extermination sites. Often under Janjaweed control, and denied all humanitarian access, these camps have rarely been seen or assessed.

One striking exception was the camp at Kailek, near Kass in South Darfur. In April 2004 a UN Inter-agency investigating team followed up on a series of disturbing reports coming from a former governor of Darfur to this writer, and subsequently to a much larger audience. When the UN team finally arrived in Kailek, it found a scene suggestive of the death camps of Eastern Europe during the Second World War. Members of the UN inter-agency team, all seasoned humanitarian professionals, confessed themselves profoundly shocked, with Rwanda their only point of reference. They found a "strategy of systematic and deliberate starvation," "imprisonment," a "policy of forced starvation," an unreported "child mortality rate of 8-9 per day"---and the continued forcible obstruction of humanitarian aid for this critically distressed, forcibly confined population. Shortly after the investigation, the population of the Kailek camp was "relocated"; there have been no further such investigations permitted by the Khartoum regime.

We have no idea how many such concentrations of displaced people exist in Darfur---or how many have finished their brutal task of extermination. Insecurity continues to make global assessments and investigations impossible (this is clearly by design on Khartoum's part). But even camps with humanitarian access offer no real refuge, since humanitarian capacity has far outstripped humanitarian need.

Yet another threat to these acutely vulnerable camp populations has taken the form of forced expulsions. Beginning in July 2004 Khartoum announced a new and intensely destructive policy of forcibly expelling displaced populations from the camps in which they sought refuge. The purported goal was to return them to "their" villages; but of course for the vast majority, their villages no longer existed. A return to the burned-out remains of villages ensured either starvation or violent death at the hands of the still-marauding Janjaweed. Though various UN and aid organizations have protested this policy, it effectively serves as Khartoum's next step in the genocide.

EARLY EVIDENCE OF GENOCIDE IN DARFUR

By August 2004 many groups and organizations had come to the conclusion that Khartoum's various policies of human destruction in Darfur amounted to genocide. The Congress declared Darfur a genocide in a unanimous bipartisan, bicameral resolution of July 23, 2004; this was followed shortly by a "genocide emergency" declaration from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. The US Committee for Refugees, Africa Action, Physicians for Human Rights, Justice Africa, as well as numerous religious groups also declared Darfur to be genocide. But evidence of genocide had been conspicuous long before, certainly by the end of 2003. What changed in half a year was not so much the quality or character of evidence, but its sheer volume and a sharp uptick in news reporting and photography. The UN's untenably low body count of "only" ten thousand (March 2004) also worked against a finding of genocide, even as the larger destructive consequences of Khartoum's conduct of war should have been clear to all (the UN figure stood unrevised from March to late July 2004). Looking for machetes, too many international actors failed

to identify the real weapons of this genocide.

Even without machetes, however, the comparison between Rwanda and Darfur became inevitable as the world moved towards April's grim commemoration of the Rwandan genocide. Perhaps this more than anything shamed many---though far from all---into realizing the ghastly irony that Rwanda was in fact, on this terrible tenth anniversary, repeating itself. Indeed, it was as though history, having patiently accepted our failure to halt the vast spasm of genocidal violence that killed perhaps eight hundred thousand people in a little over one hundred days in the spring of 1994, decided precisely ten years later to give us another chance to respond--this time it would be to "Rwanda in slow motion."

The first prominent comparison between Rwanda and Darfur was made in March 2004 by Mukesh Kapila, then UN humanitarian coordinator for Sudan. During the closing days of his tenure, Kapila (who was in Rwanda during the genocide) declared that "the only difference between Rwanda and Darfur now is the numbers" of casualties. He further declared that Darfur was not simply a conflict but an "organized attempt to do away with an [ethnically defined] group of people." Kofi Annan invoked Darfur during the April 7, 2004 UN commemoration of Rwanda, and even suggested the possibility of a militarily supported humanitarian intervention. But Kapila retired from his position, and Annan would remain virtually silent for the next three months. Alarm bells were sounding, but without sufficient volume or coordination. "Rwanda in slow motion" began to move toward real-time.

Because all the people of Darfur are Muslims, and because generations of intermarriage have removed most of the most salient racial differences between the "African" and "Arab" tribal groups, it was initially difficult for outsiders to see the importance of ethnic (and in some respects racial) differences between the region's tribal groups. Moreover, historically these differences had not animated excessive levels of violence, though feuding over land and water had increased significantly since the famine of 1984-85. But in creating the Janjaweed, Khartoum worked to incite a highly volatile sense of Arab "racial" superiority among those Arab militia groups most susceptible. By the late fall of 2003 a great deal of evidence, mainly from refugees pouring across the border into Chad, suggested Khartoum's success in "racializing" the conflict. Hundreds of interviews conducted by various news and humanitarian agencies confirm the situation as expressed in the excerpts below:

- "Tamur Bura Idriss, 31, said he lost his uncle and grandfather. He heard the gunmen say, 'You blacks, we're going to exterminate you.' He fled deeper into Chad that night." (The New York Times [dateline: Tine, Chad/Darfur] January 17, 2004)

- "I believe this is an elimination of the black race,' one tribal leader told IRIN (UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, al-Geneina [Darfur], December 11, 2003)

- "A refugee farmer from the village of Kishkish reported to Amnesty International delegates the words used by the militia: 'You are Black and you are opponents. You are our slaves, the Darfur region is in our hands and you are our herders.' They also reportedly said: 'You are slaves, we will kill you. You are like dust, we will crush you.' Another civilian attacked was reportedly told: 'You are in the fields, the rest is for our horses. We have the government on our right side, you are on the left side. You have nothing for yourselves.'" (Amnesty International Report on Darfur ["Too Many People Killed for No Reason"], London, February 3, 2004)

One of Khartoum's most successful early instruments of genocidal destruction was the impeding of humanitarian access to and operations within Darfur. In December 2003 the UN Special Envoy for Humanitarian Affairs in Sudan, Tom Eric Vraalsen, declared in a memo to Kapila that Khartoum was "systematically" impeding humanitarian access to areas in Darfur in which African populations were concentrated, and that operations running relatively effectively in September had come virtually to a halt in December. Despite Vraalsen's ominous finding, and though Jan Egeland, UN Under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs, spoke of Darfur as "probably the world's worst humanitarian crisis" in December

2003, this provoked no appropriate response.

Indeed, UN organizations moved diffidently and belatedly, and in general failed or refused to see that the enormous humanitarian crisis was being engineered with considerable deliberation and exquisitely destructive calculation. Nongovernmental organizations in the main (with signal exceptions, such as Doctors Without Borders) were also woefully inadequate in their responses. The language of genocide was regarded as sensationalist; so, too, was any corresponding urging of humanitarian intervention.

Partly as a consequence of this failure to understand the nature of the catastrophe unfolding, the UN's World Food Program and World Health Organization failed to preposition food and medical supplies in Darfur before the onset of the rains. In turn, logistics became a shambles by July and instead of Khartoum's deliberate obstruction of aid (which continued in more subtle forms), a nightmare of transport difficulties and lack of coordination ensured a growing and ever more deadly mismatch between humanitarian need and humanitarian capacity. Khartoum would have only to watch the genocide unfold.

GENOCIDE NOW

How many people have died? What has international belatedness cost in the way of Darfurian lives? How many are doomed to die? The UN figure jumped, without explanation or context, from ten thousand to thirty thousand or fifty thousand in late July. The US Agency for International Development promulgated a figure of eight thousand at the same time, but this latter figure did not take account of data on violent deaths, only death from disease and malnutrition. The painful truth is that we have no idea how many have perished, and may never. With extremely limited access, the UN and other international actors have been unable to conduct appropriate statistical sampling. The land and weather are consuming countless thousands of invisible corpses.

But a grimly authoritative epidemiological study from the US Agency for International Development gives us our best global understanding of genocidal destruction. "Projected Mortality Rates in Darfur, Sudan 2004-2005" has since April 2004 been the best basis for tracking both the Crude Mortality Rate (measured in deaths per ten thousand of affected populations) and Global Acute Malnutrition (a standard barometer for the nutritional status of populations facing food deficits). These two phenomena typically correlate extremely highly in famine conditions.

If for purposes of mortality calculations we presume a war-affected population of 2.5 million (the figure stood at 2.2 million in a June 3, 2004 communiqué from the UN, US, and European Union, and has grown steadily), and if we use the scarce data on violent deaths that has come from Doctors Without Borders/Medecins Sans Frontieres and the UN special rapporteur for extrajudicial executions, the number of dead surpassed 150,000 in August 2004, and could easily reach to over 300,000 by the end of calendar 2004. The final death toll could be well over twice this.

THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

On July 30, 2004 the United Nations Security Council passed a "wait and see" resolution giving the Khartoum regime an additional month in which to control its Janjaweed militia allies in the Darfur region. The resolution was sponsored by the US, though trimmed and weakened serially under pressure from various Security Council members. The weakness of the resolution eventually passed makes clear that there will be no authorization under Chapter VII of the UN Charter for humanitarian intervention.

Khartoum had promised in an April 2004 cease-fire agreement to do what the resolution required; that is, disarm the Janjaweed. The regime promised the same to Kofi Annan and Colin Powell when they traveled to Darfur in early July. The promises were not kept, and no one can realistically expect that additional time will make a difference. Indeed, the National Islamic Front regime has never, in fifteen years of tyrannical rule, abided by a single agreement it has signed---not one, not ever. Khartoum gave signs of

responding to the UN resolution (after an initial rejection by various regime officials); but trusting the regime at this point in the humanitarian crisis is a terrible gamble with many hundreds of thousands of lives at stake.

Despite the inconsistent performance of the Bush administration, the fate of Darfur almost certainly rests with the administration decision, likely in September, on whether or not to support humanitarian intervention. Though it is extremely unlikely that American combat troops will be part of such an operation, this is unnecessary (a substantial African Union force deployed in August, and troops from Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand have been promised if necessary). But US logistical and transport capacity, and political and diplomatic support, will be critical. Though already terribly belated, with hundreds of thousands of lives doomed to be lost, the decision to intervene can still save hundreds of thousands of lives. Every day the decision is deferred brings us closer to utterly catastrophic mortality rates.

To be effective, humanitarian intervention must have all necessary military support. There are two key tasks: dramatically augmenting transport and logistical capacity (as well providing security for transport convoys and humanitarian workers), and providing security to the acutely vulnerable civilian populations concentrated in camps, their general environs, and other vulnerable civilian locations throughout Darfur. The task of restoring security to rural Darfur is also immensely important, and must figure in any longer-term response to the conditions that have precipitated the genocidal violence. Ultimately a political solution must be forged, involving the insurgency groups, whatever government exists in Khartoum, and the leaders of both African and Arab tribal groups.

But the immediately relevant truth is that without massive humanitarian intervention hundreds of thousands will die. The task of providing for the more than 2.5 million war-affected persons is daunting in the extreme. Food supplies alone for this many people are approximately thirty-five thousand metric tons per month; critical non-food items (medical supplies, water-purification equipment, shelter) add substantially to these massive transport and logistical requirements. Moreover, aid supplies must not only be transported to Darfur, but within the vast province. The calendar militates against success, as August and September are the months in which the seasonal rains make movement most difficult in an area without an effective transportation infrastructure.

This immense food-dependent population must be sustained for many months---perhaps more than a year. Because Janjaweed insecurity was so great during the spring planting season, no planting occurred and thus there will be no fall harvest. At a time when the population of Darfur is approaching the end of the so-called "hunger gap" (the months between planting and harvest, when food reserves begin to dwindle), there will be no food to harvest and no prospect for the smaller fall/winter plantings. Food production may not begin until the spring of 2005, ensuring a huge food-dependent population for more than a year.

It is important here, in contemplating the costs of a humanitarian intervention, to bear in mind that this is not a natural calamity, nor is it even a case of massive war-related "collateral damage." The African tribal peoples of Darfur have been brought to this terribly distressed state by genocidal policies of destruction. Khartoum---using its Janjaweed allies---has "deliberately inflicted on the African peoples of Darfur conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction in whole or in part."

If the international community cannot find the will to intervene in Darfur, if we acquiesce in what it is unmistakably genocide by other means, it can only mean that the real lesson of Rwanda is that there is no one ready to learn the lesson.

[Northampton, Massachusetts---August 4, 2004]