

## **Rwanda's Shadow, From Darfur to Congo**

July 23, 2006

By Lydia Polgreen

GETI, Congo—Ngava Ngosi did not have much hope for her 3-month-old daughter, Neena. The looted hospital in eastern Congo where she brought her child had no doctors. She had already lost two sons to her country's brutal civil war, and her daughter's body was stick-thin, her breath shallow.

As I talked to Ms. Ngosi, I was reminded of an infant in similarly dire condition I had seen a month earlier in Zam Zam, a camp in Darfur, Sudan. Even though the 1-month-old Mukhtar Ahmed was near death from pneumonia, at least the camp had a health center, a doctor and antibiotics.

Last I heard, Mukhtar was recovering at a nearby city hospital. I don't know if Neena survived. But it seemed unlikely she would.

In a way, both of their fates were sealed by genocide. One child, Mukhtar, escaped what many people, including President Bush, are calling the world's newest genocide, in Darfur. Neena, in an indirect but inescapable way, is the victim of an older, deeper wound: the genocide in Rwanda that sparked the grim civil war in Congo that ultimately took more lives than any conflict since World War II. The difference between life and death for both these infants may well have been on which side of the great moral chasm of genocide they stood.

The crisis in Darfur, long neglected, finally burst into the world's consciousness. Congo remains largely forgotten. It is hard to understand why. Four million people have died in Congo since 1998, half of them children under 5, according to the International Rescue Committee. Though the war in Congo officially ended in 2002, its deadly legacy of violence and decay will kill twice as many people this year as have died in the entire Darfur conflict, which began in 2003.

But such numerical comparisons belie a deeper truth. Darfur holds the world's gaze because of that magic word, genocide. The word, implying that there are clear criminals and clear victims, has been perhaps the single greatest attention-getter for efforts, however feeble, to end the fighting and organize relief efforts, even though the fighting has lately turned in directions that indicate the situation was never so clear-cut.

The conflict in Congo, by contrast, long ago descended into a free-for-all with many sides. Instead of Darfur's seeming moral clarity, it offers a mind-numbing collection of combatants known by a jumble of acronyms. And that has been a particularly cruel fate, since the long-lasting war there in fact had its roots in the greatest mass killing since the Holocaust — the unambiguous genocide of 800,000 mostly ethnic Tutsis in neighboring Rwanda in the spring of 1994.

After Rwanda's civil war ended, Hutus who had carried out the genocide fled into Zaire, as Congo was then known, followed by their Rwandan enemies, bent on revenge. The rest of the world, wracked by guilt because it stood by as Rwanda bled, did not intervene in Rwanda's Congolese conquests. This fighting touched off the next decade of killing. Rwandan military leaders, with help from Uganda, decided to enrich themselves at Congo's expense, and rival home-grown militias soon joined the fray.

"A lot of the killings and horrors were in large part overlooked, either deliberately or not," said Anneke Van Woudenberg, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch for Congo. "The Rwandan genocide was initially why there was limited criticism of Rwanda and Uganda coming in."

Nearly a decade later, the memory of how little the world did to stop the slaughter has been invoked in efforts to end the newest atrocities, in Darfur.

Darfur seemed to present a clear moral choice. The crisis began in 2003 with a rebellion that sought to end the marginalization of non-Arab tribes by the Arab-dominated government. The Sudanese government's brutal military response, aided by murderous Arab militias, turned into a campaign that killed more than 200,000 people and drove millions from their homes.

In taking up the cause, many activists and politicians made the conflict into a morality play — a clear example of genocide in which one group, the Arabs, was determined to slaughter another, Africans. The Bush administration, which had already intervened to end the Muslim-led government's suppression of Christians, describes the killings in Darfur as genocide.

For all its emotional power, this label has done little to reduce the suffering in Darfur, and less to force an international solution. Despite the attention from politicians and celebrities, Darfur relief efforts are chronically short of cash. The peace agreement signed in May is on life support.

Some analysts have always questioned the use of the word genocide in Darfur, because the term may mask the possibility that a deeper tragedy is on the horizon.

Recent events in Sudan have revealed that the longer the Darfur conflict goes on, the more it takes on an awful complexity, for which the notion of genocide may be too dangerously simple. Rival non-Arab militias, supposedly representing the conflict's victims, have turned on each other with a ferocity rivaling that of the feared Janjaweed Arab militias. Cleavages have opened between the Arab-dominated government and the Arab militias.

The conflict has leaked into Chad, where Darfurian rebels raid refugee camps to kidnap boys to fight and Janjaweed militias attack Chadian villagers. The United Nations warned this month that the crisis may be spreading to the Central African Republic.

The peace agreement between the strongest rebel group and the Sudan government is shaky, and two other rebel groups have refused to sign the deal. The Sudanese government has so far refused to allow United Nations peacekeepers to replace the overmatched African Union force now in place.

So in some ways, the greatest tragedy in Darfur may not be that it could become the next Rwanda.

It is that it could easily become the next Congo.

If what had seemed to be a clear two-sided conflict continues to devolve into violence, the death toll in a messy regional war could easily balloon into millions.

Mukhtar, the little boy I met in Zam Zam, may be a symbol of the grim present in Darfur. But Neena, the dying girl here in Geti, portends what is to come.

On July 30, Congo will hold an election, the first real chance for the people to choose their own leaders since 1965. The world hopes this event will finally draw a line between the tragic past and an unknown future. The journey from mass murder to peace, by way of a gruesome civil war, has been long and deadly.

Darfur may be at just the beginning of that path. For the sake of Mukhtar, and millions like him, the journey had better be swift.

Copyright 2006  
The New York Times Company