

Hiding Death In Darfur

Why the Press Was So Late

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Modern tyrants understand how to control the media, and Omar al Bashir, the president of Sudan, is a master. His government's efforts to prevent widespread coverage of the death and destruction in its Darfur region succeeded for months. The crisis began in early 2003, but didn't make front-page headlines or the nightly news until this May. As a result, the systematic killing didn't spark enough public outrage to generate a quick international response.

In fact, by the time major U.S. news coverage began, as many as 30,000 people had died and more than a million had been displaced by a government-backed militia called the Janjaweed. In what appears to be an act of ethnic cleansing, the Arab-dominated group attacked black African tribes, killing men, raping women, poisoning wells, razing villages, and destroying crops. The Sudanese air force also bombed some villages. Now, U.S. officials estimate, more than 300,000 people in Darfur could die of starvation and disease before the year's end.

Bashir understands that people respond to tragedies they see unfolding on TV. So when the first international television coverage of the Darfur crisis aired — on Al Jazeera last December — his government closed the network's Khartoum bureau, confiscated its equipment, and arrested the reporter. Sudanese authorities rapidly erected an obstacle course for gaining access to Darfur. It can take more than six weeks to get a visa for Sudan, and sometimes the government won't grant them at all. Those reporters awarded visas are required to get permission to travel to Darfur, and once they get them, must be accompanied there by a government escort. Even then, soldiers can limit access to pillaged villages or displacement camps.

Journalists from Europe, where the public has more interest in Africa, got around the

red tape by sneaking into Darfur from Chad. *Le Monde*, for example, ran a major story from Darfur at the beginning of this year. The British press began to cover the story around the same time.

The earliest U.S. coverage of note came in late 2003 when *The World*, a public radio program, ran a story with UN officials discussing the Sudan crisis. But this story, and two others published inside *The New York Times* in January, didn't generate much follow-up.

However, a steady stream of information from the UN and human rights groups began to generate opinion pieces. In late February, *The Washington Post* ran an op-ed by a Smith College professor entitled "Unnoticed Genocide." In March, the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote several columns from the border between Chad and Sudan. In April, an op-ed by Samantha Power in *The New York Times* called the U.S. and other nations "bystanders to slaughter" in Darfur. In the absence of TV images and front-page stories, these opinion pieces helped raise awareness.

Then in April, while the world was marking the tenth anniversary of genocide in Rwanda, both President Bush and Kofi Annan issued statements criticizing the government of Sudan for brutality in Darfur. Later that month, Sudan expanded press access, and the crisis finally started getting major coverage. On May 4, the *Times* ran a front-page story with vivid color photographs. Shortly after, PBS's *The NewsHour* ran a lengthy piece from Chad, and ABC's *World News Tonight* carried a piece from Darfur. Still, the government continued to limit the media's movement and tried to manipulate coverage. For instance, officials emptied refugee camps before Annan's visit so reporters wouldn't see residents languishing in squalor.

In Darfur, thousands of people died before the world took notice. Some of them might be alive today if the press had found ways to move more quickly, such as bypassing Sudanese restrictions by entering Sudan from Chad, reporting through the eyes of refugees in Chad, or paying more heed to reports and pictures from human rights groups. The question now is, What will journalists do the next time a tyrant tries something similar? How can they keep him from getting away with it?

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