

# No Further Evasion of the Essential Question: What will we do in Darfur?

Eric Reeves

On the very eve of the Rwandan genocide the international community seems finally to have found its voice in condemning the Khartoum regime's brutal, systematic displacement and destruction of the African tribal groups of Darfur, primarily the Masseleit, the Zaghawa, and the Fur. The actions that stand condemned, considered collectively, and given the clear racial/ethnic animus defining them, amount to genocide – the deliberate destruction of these people because of who they are, "as such."

But even so, it is far from clear that the searing clarity of this genocidal destruction will produce an international response more adequate to the catastrophe than the shameful acquiescence of April 1994, when the world watched in dismay from a distance as 800,000 people in Rwanda were slaughtered in frenzied mayhem.

Though the comparison to Rwanda has recently been made explicitly by Mukesh Kapila, now former UN humanitarian coordinator for Sudan, the description of war in Darfur that is most often offered by UN officials and others is "ethnic cleansing." This is evidently meant to convey a lesser degree of "criminality" and urgency. Jan Egeland, UN Under-secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs – and notably one of the first officials to call attention to the scale of the catastrophe in Darfur – is entirely representative:

"What we see is...the systematic depopulation of areas. People are not necessarily killed then. They are moved away," Egeland said at a [April 2, 2004] news conference. 'I would say it is ethnic cleansing, but not genocide.' " (Reuters, April 4, 2004)

But what is happening in Darfur is not simply "ethnic cleansing," any more than the destruction of the Jews in Eastern Europe was simply a "Säuberung," the Nazi euphemism for genocide (the German word means "cleansing" or "clearing"). For given the immensely destructive consequences of "systematic depopulation" in rural Darfur, there is too little difference in too many cases between the deliberate killing of members of a "racial or ethnical group" and the inescapable, fully known consequences of the "systematic depopulation" of the members of this group.

Here we must remember that the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide specifies not only "killing members of a group" among

they will have been killed no less deliberately by a military strategy that Khartoum has relentlessly followed, both in using its own official military assets (including frequent aerial bombardment of civilian targets), but in the purposeful directing of its Arab militia allies (the “janjaweed”) in the countless attacks that have produced the present catastrophe.

In short, knowing full well the consequences of such a strategy, Khartoum has engaged in a military campaign that has “deliberately inflicted on the African tribal groups of Darfur conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction in whole or in part.”

This is genocide.

Neither the euphemizing obligations of diplomats, nor the constraints imposed by various institutional mandates---governmental and non-governmental---can change this reality.

It was precisely such diffidence, coupled with indecision and moral failure, that ten years ago produced international acquiescence in the slaughter, by Hutu extremists, of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda. Unable to say the word---genocide---it was easier not to act, easier not to accept the obligations that are stipulated in the Genocide Convention for “contracting parties:

“The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish.” (Article 1, UN Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948)

But of course until genocide has been declared, the “contracting parties” (including the US) are not obligated to “undertake to prevent and to punish” the genocidaires operating in Darfur. This is the context in which we must seek to understand why no organization or government has, to date, proposed a single course of action that will not be fully undermined should Khartoum intransigently assert the “rights” of national sovereignty. There are abundant calls for “informing,” “condemning,” “requesting,” “calling upon,” “insisting,” “recommending,”---even “ensuring.” But inevitably even such “ensuring” is simply part of a “recommendation” that has no provision for enforcement or implementation or even means of pressuring for compliance.

Most conspicuously, there is no voice calling for humanitarian intervention—the cross-border provision of urgently needed humanitarian assistance, civilian protection, and the creation of critically important safe havens for the almost 1 million displaced, both in Chad and in Darfur. And it is here that the distinction between “ethnic cleansing” and genocide cuts deeply in implication, given the explicit provisions for “prevention” in the Genocide Convention.

To be sure, Norway and the US seemed to be approaching an articulation of the need for humanitarian intervention in early February 2004:

“The United States reaffirms its commitment to addressing the immediate protection and assistance needs of those in Darfur, as well as throughout Sudan, including humanitarian cross border operations if assistance cannot be provided through Sudan.” (Statement of US AID Administrator Andrew Natsios, from the Press Office of USAID, February 3, 2004)

Norway’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Petersen spoke in similarly urgent terms at the time:

“Norway is extremely concerned about the further deterioration of the already dramatic



humanitarian situation in Darfur province in western Sudan in the last few days. Norway deplores the recent bombing of the town of Tine, which continues the pattern of indiscriminate attacks on civilians, and the serious breaches of human rights that are constantly being reported. Norway will together with other donors do what is necessary to provide humanitarian relief and protection for the population of Darfur [emphasis added]." (Press release: Norway's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 4, 2004)

But these commitments have not been reiterated, and no planning is evident that would make good on these commitments. Voice of America has recently reported that, "US defense officials are closely monitoring developments in Sudan's troubled Darfur region, but say there are no plans at present for any military response to the humanitarian crisis there" (Voice of America, April 1, 2004).

Here we must bear in mind that any planning for humanitarian intervention will need to take account of the immense difficulties created by the seasonal rains that are due in about a month; these rains will make ground transport in many places virtually impossible. Indeed, logistics in general will be nightmarishly difficult. Moreover, Chad's permission must be secured for such an operation. Given the weak Chad government's close relationship with Khartoum, this would require robust diplomatic pressure on President Idris Deby from France---but there has been no sign of such a commitment from Paris, even in the wake of French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin's recent trip (late February 2004) to the region.

In short, it seems unlikely that humanitarian intervention will occur without a finding of genocide. But then we urgently need a much more compelling explanation of why, given the overwhelming body of evidence before the international community, what is occurring in Darfur is not genocide. And such explanation cannot be a glib distinction between displacement and "depopulation," on the one hand, and human destruction on the other---not when the former so clearly and consequentially implies the latter.

All the current anguish over the Rwandan genocide, all the reflections on what could and should have been done, all the genuflection on lessons learned or not learned---all this is incinerated in the agony of the ongoing, ethnically/racially animated destruction of tens of thousands of human beings in Darfur.

Who will explain to the people of Darfur why it was possible for the US and the Europeans, without UN authorization, to intervene in Kosovo (where perhaps altogether 10,000 people died) but not in Darfur, where many times this number will certainly die? Who will explain why this has nothing to do with the fact that the victims of the genocide are Africans? Who will explain why this devaluation of human lives is not ultimately a terrible racism?

Who will explain why an assertion of Sudanese national sovereignty by the viciously tyrannical National Islamic Front regime---which came to power by military coup, deposing an elected government---trumps the moral significance of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives in Darfur? Who will explain why a regime that has not observed a signed cease-fire, refuses to begin substantive peace talks, and refuses to commit to a humanitarian cease-fire is being given more diplomatic breathing space in which to pursue genocidal destruction?

Who will explain to the people of Darfur how long the catastrophe will be permitted to

accelerate without more than hortatory language from the international community? Who will tell the people of Darfur whether or not there is a threshold of human destruction at which the international community will respond with humanitarian intervention? And if so, what is that threshold? Having long surpassed the total for Kosovo, and with a further 100,000 lives to be lost because of Khartoum's present destruction of the agricultural economy and medical resources, Darfur and its people will wonder: is the number 150,000--- a figure that seems virtually certain to be exceeded? Perhaps it is 200,000? Perhaps the half-way point in the figure for Rwanda, 400,000?

Are these numbers anything but a reflection of moral madness on the part of the international community? And yet as Human Rights Watch has asserted, "almost 1 million Darfurian civilians have been forced to flee their homes in the past fourteen months." ("Darfur in Flames: Atrocities in Western Sudan," page 1). And the UN puts the figure of those described as "war-affected" at 3 million. Who can say that the final total, in the absence of forceful international action and with Khartoum's continued intransigence, will not ultimately bear comparison with the numbers of Rwanda?

These many questions all reduce to one: Is the international community prepared to allow Khartoum's assertion of national sovereignty to outweigh the significance of hundreds of thousands of lives in Darfur?

Given all that we know about Darfur, and all that can be inferred with moral certainty, and given the present refusal by any government or international organization to call for humanitarian intervention, we have a default answer: the world indeed again stands prepared merely to witness vast, racially/ethnically driven human destruction. And until there is a clear, decisive call for urgent humanitarian intervention, this answer will stand. The issue of the day is not remembering Rwanda, but understanding why we are still prepared to accept genocide in Africa.