Genocide in Darfur - How the Horror Began

By Eric Reeves

September 3, 2005 — In one of the most remote places in Africa, an insurgency began unnoticed under the shadow of the war in Iraq in 2003, killing 350,000 to 400,000 people in 29 months by means of violence, malnutrition, and disease in the first genocidal rampage of the 21st century.

The insurgency began virtually unnoticed in February 2003; it has, over the past two years, precipitated the first great episode of genocidal destruction in the 21st century. The victims are the non-Arab or African tribal groups of Darfur, primarily the Fur, the Massaleit, and the Zaghawa, but also the Tunjur, the Birgid, the Dajo, and others. These people have long been politically and economically marginalized, and in recent years the National Islamic Front regime, based in Sudan’s capital of Khartoum, has refused to control increasingly violent Arab militia raids of 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 by advancing desertification throughout the Sahel region.

But it was Khartoum’s failure to respond to the desperate economic needs of this huge region (it is the size of France), the delayed judiciary, the lack of political representation, and in particular the growing impunity on the part of Arab raiders that gave rise to the full-scale armed conflict.

Not directly related to the 21-year civil conflict that recently formally ended in southern Sudan—a historic agreement was signed in Nairobi on January 9, 2005—Darfur’s insurgency found early success against Khartoum’s regular military forces. But this success had a terrible consequence: the regime in Khartoum switched from a military strategy of direct confrontation to a policy of systematically destroying the African tribal groups perceived as the civilian base of support for the insurgents. The primary instrument in this new policy has been the Janjaweed, a loosely organized Arab militia force of perhaps 20,000 men, primarily on horse and camel.

This force is dramatically different in character, military strength, and purpose from previous militia raiders. Janjaweed 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 implicate 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," says 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."

Evidence of genocide

The nature of the attacks on African villages in Darfur—as reported by numerous human rights groups—clearly marks the Khartoum regime’s genocidal intent. Janjaweed assaults, typically conducted in concert with Khartoum’s regular military forces (including helicopter gunships and Antonov bombers), have been comprehensively destructive of both human life and livelihood: men and boys killed en masse, women and girls raped or abducted, and all means of agricultural production destroyed. Thriving villages have had buildings burned, water sources poisoned, irrigation systems torn up, food and seed stocks destroyed, and fruit trees cut down. Cattle have been looted on a massive scale, and most of those not looted have died from lack of water and food, as people flee into the inhospitable wastes of this arid region.

According to Article 2 of the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide—to which the US and all current members of the UN Security Council are party—genocide encompasses not only the deliberate killing of members of a "national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such," but also "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." The latter is what we have seen in Darfur.

As a result, agricultural production has largely come to a halt in Darfur, and the United Nations estimates that in the very near future 3.5 million people will be in urgent need of food assistance (the total population of Darfur is approximately 6.5 million). Moreover, there is no sign that the current planting season will yield a significant fall harvest. Huge civilian populations—well over two million people—will be dependent on food aid for the foreseeable future. Many of these people will die in what has become genocide by attrition.

The humanitarian crisis

The current rainy season in Darfur is already creating immense logistical problems for humanitarian aid groups, as it did last summer. Darfur is one of the most remote places in Africa, and quite distant from navigable bodies of water. Both food and critical nonfood items (medical supplies, shelter, equipment for clean water) must be transported over land by truck or (much more expensively) flown into the regional capitals of the three Darfur states.

Though humanitarian organizations are performing heroically under extremely difficult conditions, it’s clear that there is a deadly mismatch between humanitarian capacity and human need. As the rains sever various transport corridors and insecurity closes others, many villages and communities are becoming inaccessible. This occurs against the backdrop of a traditional "hunger gap"—the period between spring planting and fall harvest.

Moreover, the overcrowded camps for displaced persons—now the only place of refuge for more than two million civilians—face serious shortages of sanitary facilities. The threat of waterborne disease is becoming acute, as many of the camps are just too closely crowded together. Outbreaks of cholera or dysentery could quickly claim tens of thousands of lives in addition to those already claimed by violence, disease, and malnutrition. Extant data suggest that between 350,000 and 400,000 have perished during the past 29 months.

A recent UN mortality assessment indicates that more than 6,000 continue to die every month, and Jan Egeland, UN Undersecretary for Humanitarian Affairs, has warned that the toll may climb to 100,000 per month if insecurity forces humanitarian operations to withdraw from Darfur. Banditry, hijacking of humanitarian convoys, and attacks on humanitarian workers have grown relentlessly in recent months, even as there has been a decline in major conflict between Khartoum’s regular forces and the insurgency groups.

Peace negotiations in Abuja, Nigeria, have done nothing to rein in the Janjaweed militia, and a small African Union monitoring force on the ground has had only marginal effect in addressing civilian and humanitarian security needs. The death toll in Darfur’s genocide may reach that of Rwanda’s by year’s end.

Racism and Islamism in Khartoum

The National Islamic Front (which has attempted to rename itself innocuously as the “National Congress Party”) is essentially unchanged since it seized power from a democratically elected government in a 1989 military coup, deliberately aborting Sudan’s most promising peace process since independence in 1956. With the exception of Islamist ideologue Hassan El-Turabi—the mastermind of the 1989 coup who split with his former allies and is no longer part of the government—the same brutal men still control the NIF 16 years after it seized power. Field Marshal Omer El-Bashir retains...
the presidency, and Ali Osman Taha—arguably the most powerful man in Sudan—serves as vice president and controls the terrifyingly efficient security services. Naife Ali Naife, Gutbi Al-Mahdi, and other longtime members of the NIF serve in various advisory capacities. And Major General Saleh Abdullah Gosh, recently flown to Washington by the CIA, retains control of the Mukhabarat (Sudan's intelligence and security service) even as he is among those members of the NIF indicted at the International Criminal Court in The Hague for crimes against humanity in Darfur.

These are the men who settled on a genocidal response to the insurgency movements that emerged in Darfur in early 2003. But the NIF's history of genocide goes back much further than the current catastrophe in Darfur. Animated by a radical Islamism and sense of Arab racial superiority, the movement engaged in genocide almost from the time it seized power. A year ago, seasoned Sudan watcher Alex de Waal of the British group Justice Africa wrote for the London Review of Books what remains one of the best overviews of the Darfur crisis. In the piece, he observed that genocide in Darfur is not the genocidal campaign of a government at the height of its ideological hubris, as the 1992 jihad in the Nuba Mountains was, or coldly determined to secure natural resources, as when it sought to clear the oilfields of southern Sudan of their troublesome inhabitants. This is the routine cruelty of a security cabal, its humanity withered by years in power; it is genocide by force of habit. As part of a ghastly jihad, the NIF conducted relentless military assaults on civilians and enforced a humanitarian aid embargo that lasted more than a decade.

The same men ordered the scorched-earth clearances of the oil regions in southern Sudan to provide security for the operations of international oil companies. The actions of oil companies from Canada, Sweden, Austria, China, Malaysia, and India—directly supporting the NIF regime—constitute one of the most shameful episodes in the long and terrible history of resource extraction in Africa.

The result of these policies was that between 1989 and 2002 many hundreds of thousands of Sudanese were either killed or displaced. In the Nuba Mountains and the oil regions of southern Sudan, as in Darfur, the NIF regime settled upon a deliberate policy of human destruction, targeting ethnically African populations that had rebelled against, or were victims of, decades of political and economic marginalization.

The July 9 inauguration of a new Sudanese “government of national unity” (GNU) has appropriately received a good deal of news coverage. (The GNU represents the culmination of an arduous peace process going back almost a decade and the formal end to war in southern Sudan. Perhaps the most destructive civil conflict since World War II and one of the longest wars in Africa’s history, it saw the Christian and animist South pitted against the Muslim, Arab-speaking North. As many as 2.5 million people have died since the second phase of the civil war began in 1983—and likely more than four million if we consider its earlier phase (1955-72). More than five million people were displaced by the war—Sudan has the world’s largest population of internally displaced persons—and southern Sudan was utterly devastated.)

John Garang, the 60-year-old guerilla leader of the southern Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army, was killed in a helicopter crash on July 30, just three weeks after being inaugurated as “First Vice President” in the GNU. One of the few elder southern statesmen who believed in a united Sudan, Garang was pivotal in securing the peace agreement that ended the civil war and was a symbol of hope for many in the south. It was assumed in many quarters that Garang—as someone long sympathetic to the cause of Sudan’s marginalized peoples—would use his new position to help end genocide in Darfur. His death has raised fears about the newly established peace, with some southerners claiming the Sudanese government, dominated by their northern opponents, might have played a role in it. A seven-member team is investigating the crash and is scheduled to present its findings by early September.

Who is dying

Darfur’s prerace population of approximately 6.5 million was perhaps 60 to 65 percent non-Arab—some four million “Africans.” In fact, all Darfuris are African, and skin color is a wholly inadequate measure of ethnicity. But ethnic differences do exist—the use of Arabic as a first language, agricultural practices, and a variety of more subtle cultural differences—and identification by ethnicity comes easily to Darfuris, even in matters such as gain and attire. But of this population of roughly four million “Africans,” UN figures for displacement, or even for those defined as “conflict-affected,” cannot account for more than one million people. Some are in urban areas, but hundreds of thousands have died (more on exactly how many below), and hundreds of thousands more are at risk in inaccessible rural areas of Darfur.

Sometime in summer 2004—we’ll probably never know just when—human mortality in the Darfur genocide became more a function of malnutrition and disease than violent destruction. We must not lose sight of is that deaths from malnutrition and disease are no less the product of genocidal ambitions than violent killings: Having so comprehensively and deliberately destroyed the villages and livelihoods of the African tribal populations of Darfur, Khartoum and its Janjaweed allies bear full responsibility for the ongoing deadly consequences of these assaults on civilian targets.

The consensus among Darfuris in exile, at least those who have access to sources on the ground in Darfur, is that approximately 90 percent of all African villages have now been destroyed. As with those who have never had access to displaced persons and into eastern Chad, they have created extremely vulnerable populations in highly concentrated locations. The United Nations reports approximately two million people in camps for displaced persons to which it has access in Darfur and another 200,000 refugees hiding inside Chad along the Darfur border. Many hundreds of thousands of people remain unaccounted for—dead, hiding, staying with host families in other locations, or simply unregistered by the United Nations.

Those inside the camps must contend not only with relentless insecurity but with overcrowding, inadequate sanitary facilities, shortcomings in shelter, and severe water shortages—some locations people have been forced to survive on what humanitarian groups consider less than half the daily human requirement of water. Though the rainy season may alleviate this problem, the torrential rains also create severe risks for outbreaks of waterborne diseases such as cholera and dysentery. There were no major outbreaks of either disease in summer 2004; displaced Darfuris are very unlikely to again escape diseases that can claim tens of thousands of lives in a matter of weeks.

Food shortages, however, remain the greatest threat to human life in Darfur. Darfuris normally rely on foraging in times of desperation, but the insecurity that continues to be created by the Janjaweed makes this impossible. Many of the hundreds of thousands in inaccessible rural areas are slowly starving.

Children, as always, are most vulnerable.

Insecurity prevented a significant planting this spring and early summer (normally the major planting season in the agricultural calendar), so there will be no fall harvest—this after last fall’s severely attenuated harvest. Significant domestic food production in Darfur will not be in evidence until fall 2006—at the earliest. People already weakened by malnutrition have become increasingly vulnerable to disease and will only become weaker and more vulnerable in the months ahead. Genocidal mortality will continue for years.

Last December, Jan Egeland, the UN’s Undersecretary for Humanitarian Affairs, estimated that if insecurity forces the withdrawal of humanitarian operations, as many as 100,000 may die every month. And as Kofi Annan recently noted in his report to the Security Council, threats against humanitarian workers are on the rise.

There is compelling data concerning violent mortality. Even with significant biases toward undercounting, the data assembled by the Coalition for International Justice (CIJ), the organization appointed by the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (US AID) to research human destruction, strongly suggests that more than 200,000 people have died violently in Darfur. Though not technically an International Justice (CIJ), the organization appointed by the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (US AID) to research human destruction, strongly suggests that more than 200,000 people have died violently in Darfur. Though not technically an International Justice (CIJ), the organization appointed by the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (US AID) to research human destruction, strongly suggests that more than 200,000 people have died violently in Darfur.
This data, along with previous mortality data from the World Health Organization and other humanitarian organizations, and several key epidemiological studies, suggest that between 350,000 and 400,000 people have died from all causes—violence, malnutrition, and disease—in Darfur’s genocide. The impending spike upward in monthly mortality rates, and the great likelihood that genocide by attrition will continue for months and years, suggest, that total mortality may eventually exceed that of Rwanda in 1994. Unfortunately, news media have almost all failed to take account of the mortality data available, particularly data suggesting a total for violent mortality.

The future of Darfur

There is no sign that normal agricultural production will resume any time in the near future. There is no sign that the insecurity confining people to camps for the displaced or villages under siege will be alleviated, even with the currently planned deployment of additional African Union personnel. There is no sign that the international community intends to fund humanitarian efforts in Darfur at an appropriate level. There is no sign that Khartoum’s National Islamic Front, and the new government it dominates, has changed its genocidal ambitions, now best served by preserving the deadly status quo. There is no sign that peace negotiations in Abuja, Nigeria will yield more than the vaguely worded “declaration of principles” signed last month. And there is no sign of the international humanitarian intervention that might stop the genocide.

There are only signs that the dying will continue indefinitely.

The US response to Darfur must be understood in the context of Bush-administration efforts to end Sudan’s north-south war—as well as the administration’s attempt to secure intelligence from Khartoum on international terrorism. (The National Islamic Front hosted Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda from 1991 to 1996, and retained strong connections even when bin Laden moved to Afghanistan.) These have been policy priorities despite the administration’s explicit conclusion, first announced by former Secretary of State Colin Powell last September, that genocide was taking place in Darfur and that the Khartoum government was playing a role.

The Bush administration invested heavily in negotiating an end to the north-south war, and the signing earlier this year of a formal peace agreement—however limited and flawed—must be recognized as a major foreign policy achievement. But precisely because of the administration’s investment in a north-south agreement, including the appointment of former Senator John Danforth as special envoy to Sudan, there was widespread reluctance within the State Department to hold Khartoum accountable for the genocide that was clearly unfolding in early 2004, when north-south peace negotiations had entered their final phase.

The thinking by US officials involved in the negotiations, and their British and Norwegian counterparts, was that pressing the National Islamic Front regime too hard on Darfur would undermine the chances of consummating the north-south agreement. But this diplomatic strategy was of course transparent to Khartoum and thus perversely provided an incentive for the regime to extend negotiations as long as possible—always promising a light at the end of the diplomatic tunnel.

The last issue of substance between Khartoum and the southern Sudan People’s Liberation Movement was resolved in a protocol signed by all parties in late May 2004. Two weeks later, following months of terrifying reports from human rights groups, the State Department announced that it would begin an investigation to determine whether Khartoum was guilty of genocide in Darfur. The close sequence of dates was not a coincidence.

But a tremendous amount of the violent destruction in Darfur had already been accomplished by June 2004; indeed, this marks the approximate point in the conflict at which deaths from malnutrition and disease began to exceed those from violence. Moreover, Khartoum continued to use the north-south peace agreement as a threat, declaring with brazen confidence that if it were pushed too hard on Darfur, the negotiated agreement might be endangered. The agreement’s final signing ceremony occurred in Nairobi on January 9, 2005; the inauguration of a new government took place six months later, on July 9, 2005; the killing in Darfur, of course, continues.

US belatedness in responding with appropriate determination to genocide was mirrored in the flaccid responses of European countries, individually and through the European Union. Canada, Japan, the Arab League, and the African Union were no better. America has been the most generous nation in providing humanitarian assistance to Darfur, reflecting chiefly the determination of officials at US AID. Meanwhile, the commitments of other countries to relief efforts have been less than stellar. The financial responses of Germany, France, Italy, Japan, and the oil-rich Arab countries have been scandalously lagged.

The African Union in Darfur

The AU began to deploy a small number of monitors to Darfur following a ceasefire signed in April 2004 in N’Djamena, Chad. A commitment in late summer 2004 to increase the monitoring force to approximately 3,500 went unfulfilled for over half a year, and during this time the AU was unable to secure from Khartoum a mandate for civilian protection-only a mandate to monitor the largely nonexistent ceasefire. Recently, the AU has said it will increase its force to 7,700 by September, and possibly 12,000 by spring 2006.

As many have recognized, the AU is quite unable to deploy to this force-level with its own resources and NATO, as a consequence, has very recently agreed to provide logistics and transport capacity. The bigger problem, however, is that even with NATO’s help, the nascent AU Peace and Security Commission is simply not up to this mission if the goal for Darfur is adequate protection for civilians and humanitarian operations. The AU does not have the troops, equipment, or essential interoperability of forces that are necessary given the scale of the crisis. Those paying the price for disingenuous suggestions to the contrary are vulnerable civilian populations and humanitarian aid workers.

Recently, Foreign Minister Cheikh Tidiane Gadio of Senegal refused to accept any longer what has become the mantra of “African solutions for African problems.” Gadio declared, on the occasion of a visit by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, that his government was “totally dissatisfied” with the hollowness of AU claims to be able to stop genocide in Darfur. Calling the situation “totally unacceptable,” he continued: “We don’t like the fact that the African Union has asked the international community to allow us to bring an African solution to an African problem and unfortunately the

This thinking is remarkable, the more so since Nigeria-current chair of the African Union—has declared at various points that the situation is fully in hand and actually improving. Comments to this effect have come from both President Obasanjo and General Festus Okonkwo, the Nigerian commander of AU forces in Darfur. Nigeria has strong-armed into silence many African nations. The country, which wants to maintain good relations with the Muslim world even as it confronts militant Islam in northern Nigerian states, has yielded to pressure from the Arab League—especially Libya and Egypt—to define the Darfur genocide as an African problem rather than an international one.

Genocidal destruction in Darfur will continue for the foreseeable future. The resources to halt massive, ethnically targeted destruction—of lives and livelihoods—are nowhere in sight. The consequences of this destruction, now extending over almost two and a half years, will be evident for years—in villages that have been burned to the ground, in poisoned water sources, in the cruel impoverishment of people who have lost everything, in deaths that will continue to mount relentlessly.

There is currently no evidence that the international community is prepared to deploy adequate protection for either Darfur’s vulnerable civilian populations or endangered humanitarian operations. August, traditionally the month of heaviest rains, saw a further attenuation of relief efforts, as transport of food and other critical supplies became mired in flooded riverbeds and blocked by severed road arteries. At the same time, waterborne diseases, along with malaria and a wide range of communicable diseases, will take huge numbers of lives. These diseases will be particularly potent...
killers because so much of the civilian population of Darfur has been seriously weakened by malnutrition. Famine conditions have already been identified in parts of Darfur, and the UN's World Food Program estimates that 3.5 million people will need food assistance in the near future.

Our moral choice

It is important that the stark moral choice confronting the international community be absolutely clear. History must not record this moment as one in which our decision was uninformed by either the scale of the human catastrophe or an understanding of what is required to stop genocidal destruction.

And so, despite the long odds against an intervention actually taking place, it is our obligation to say with conviction and understanding the most urgent truth: In the absence of humanitarian intervention, Darfur's civilian population, as well as humanitarian workers, will be consigned to pervasive, deadly insecurity; displaced persons will remain trapped in camps that are hotbeds of disease; agricultural production will remain at a standstill, leaving millions of people dependent on international food assistance for the foreseeable future; aid workers will continue to fall prey to targeted and opportunistic violence.

In other words, the genocide in Darfur will continue. We can stop it. We are simply choosing not to.

Eric Reeves is a professor at Smith College and an expert on Darfur. For more information see Reeves's website, www.sudanreeves.org. Reprinted with permission of the New Republic, 2005.