



SPEAKING OUT

The Lessons of Darfur

BY HARRY C. BLANEY III

The Darfur crisis continues on its grim course as these words are being written in early November, and likely will not be fully resolved by the time this appears in print. But some lessons for U.S. diplomacy and our future role in the world are already clear — and deeply troubling.

The six years of my Foreign Service career I spent as a policy planner inculcated in me the urgency for the State Department to get ahead of the headlines and push the international diplomatic community — as well as the U.S. bureaucracy — to react rapidly to situations like Darfur. So I commend Secretary of State Colin Powell, in particular, for his frequent and impassioned calls for action, including his midsummer visit to Sudan, and his insistence on calling the atrocity what it is: genocide.

But it quickly became apparent that President George W. Bush had no intention of using his “bully pulpit” to gain domestic support for intervening in Darfur if the international community failed to act — in sharp contrast to his approach to Iraq a year earlier. And that realization freed the Sudanese government to break every agreement it entered into and ignore every ultimatum the U.N. belatedly issued.

Let me be clear: The lion’s share of blame belongs to the regime in Khartoum for instigating this latest reign of terror against its own citizens, using the forces of the Jinjaweed (also known as the Janjaweed) to do their dirty work for them. But the

Sudanese government’s gamble that the world would not go beyond rhetoric has paid off handsomely.

Many of our allies have worked to thwart or at least delay any effective multilateral action, both at the United Nations and elsewhere. Their motives varied: some had commercial interests (e.g., Sudanese oil), while others asserted they could not intervene in another country’s internal affairs, no matter how badly it mistreated its own people. But the result was the same: a green light for the killings to proceed.

In particular, Russia, China and France — and, eventually, a majority of the U.N. Security Council — wasted no time in making clear that they would not support any effective sanctions against the Sudan government. (China went so far as to threaten a veto.) Sec. Powell had to labor mightily to get the Security Council to set a 90-day deadline for Khartoum to cease its support for the killers and to provide access to the region for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and African Union monitoring — but with no enforcement mechanism and next to no resources to implement the intervention.

When Khartoum ignored that demand, barely bothering to conceal its contempt, we then went to another 30-day ticking clock — all the while witnessing even more deliberate devastation of the Darfur people, with thousands dying by the week. Some progress finally seemed to be made this fall as more assistance was allowed to get in, but the aid

remained under Sudan’s control. In addition, the Khartoum government simply dressed the Jinjaweed in uniforms, assigning them duty as guards for the displaced persons camps — a classic case of letting the foxes guard the henhouse.

As I write in November, after yet another so-called deadline expired, reports of murder, rape, forced relocation and government carnage continue. Yet the international community, including the U.S., inexplicably continues to insist it needs the cooperation of the Khartoum government to intervene more aggressively.

Averting Our Eyes

Mindful of that background, one can make a case that even strong U.S. leadership might not have sufficed to energize the international community. But I would contend that the Bush administration’s failure to follow up decisively on Sec. Powell’s welcome declaration that the Darfur situation constitutes “genocide” doomed all efforts to intervene effectively from the start.

That is not to say the U.S. has done nothing to help; quite the contrary. Not only are we one of the very few governments to consistently advocate an end to the killings, but we have given concrete unilateral and multilateral assistance. As Sec. Powell testified to Congress in early September, U.S. government humanitarian assistance in response to the Darfur crisis in Sudan and Chad (where thousands of refugees have fled) already totaled \$211.3 million as of Sept. 2. This

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includes \$112.9 million in food assistance, \$50.2 million in non-food assistance, \$36.4 million for refugees in Chad, \$5 million for refugee programs in Darfur, and \$6.8 million for the African Union monitoring mission (which we initiated through base camp set-up and logistics support by a private U.S. contractor). An additional \$20.5 million in Fiscal Year 2004 funds is in the pipeline for initial support of this expanded mission. Yet all of this did not stop the killing and abuse.

It has been argued that the administration was legitimately concerned that direct action by the U.S. would unwind other interests — global, regional and (most of all) domestic. For example, State Department officials made it clear they did not want to lessen Sudan's cooperation on counterterrorism, unwind the tentative agreement between Khartoum and southern Sudanese rebels, stir up opposition within the Arab world, or upset our larger agenda at the U.N., particularly with the Russians and the Chinese. They argued that the Defense Department would oppose any additional troop commitments, even relatively small ones.

It is also true that Sudan is in a region of Africa that few Americans know about, and, it seems, fewer care very much about (even without factoring in "donor fatigue"). Nor did it help that the U.S. media — with a few honorable exceptions — have consistently played down the crisis and its humanitarian costs. Even at the height of the genocide, Darfur rarely made the headlines or the opening story on network news, and days often went by without any mention in mainstream media at all, even as thousands and thousands of women and children died. When the crisis was covered, especially on TV, it was presented episodically — almost like some unstoppable natural disaster — and with little real analysis.

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Instead, we were fed a pablum of reports about the Olympics, murder trials, the upcoming television season and so forth

Even in my own NGO community, which had the courage to send people into harm's way on the ground in Sudan, some have tended to wring their hands instead of demanding that Washington, and the world, act with force or effective sanctions. At a major conference about Darfur held at American University on Sept. 24, the despair of the NGO representatives was so deep that many speakers argued it was useless even to urge direct intervention by American troops. Their preferred alternative was action by the African Union, which has consistently said it would only act with the Sudanese government's approval. Reinforcing that message, Khartoum's ambassador in

Washington attended the conference and largely refused to acknowledge the government's own responsibility for the situation in his remarks to the conference. He also insisted that his government would never allow international peacekeepers to enter the country and protect civilians.

Eventually, Khartoum grudgingly agreed to allow some African Union observers and troops to enter Sudan, albeit with a limited mandate — but not nearly enough to be effective or even upset the government. As the *New York Times* reported on Oct. 26, the A.U. monitors are not permitted to intervene to protect civilians even as they are being killed or raped. Yet African Union leaders actually praised the Khartoum government for its cooperation during their mid-October meeting in Libya. Thus, the African Union mission appears more and

more a sham, and our support for it seems to be mostly a fig leaf in terms of stopping the killing.

In retrospect, it seems clear that our ongoing involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan distracted Washington policy-makers from addressing yet another crisis. And the presidential and congressional elections made a decision to intervene with our own military forces even more inopportune and difficult. I was heartened that, in the first presidential debate on Sept. 30, Senator Kerry pushed a bit on the need for American support for intervention, if not clearly an on-the-ground role for American troops. But in response, Pres. Bush said America was already engaged, and ruled out any change in the U.S. script for dealing with Sudan.

And that "script" is the real problem. In the interest of pursuing the



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“war on terrorism,” the Bush administration has continued on a path of accommodation with a regime that can best be described as little more than thugs and killers. And it has done so knowing full well that only the application of force and effective sanctions, or at least a direct and unquestioned threat of it, along with a massive commitment of humanitarian resources, could prevent the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Darfur civilians, most women and children.

Lessons to be Learned

In a Sept. 20 editorial, the *Financial Times* observed: “The search for maximum consensus has clashed with the need to send a sufficiently robust message to Khartoum to make it crack down on government-linked militias.” The paper speculated that the United States was more focused on getting the crisis “contained” than on stopping the killings and punishing the perpetrators. Sadly, that interpretation seems borne out by the facts.

We are going through a period of debate about what role America should play in world affairs. Leaders and opinion-makers who have led us into Iraq for what they now call humanitarian and democracy-related reasons fall silent before the genocide in Sudan. Once again we stood aside at a critical juncture to prevent another genocide of horrendous dimensions. That was a real choice and says a lot about our nation and its leaders. It is a story that has been repeated from the days of the Holocaust to the killing fields of Cambodia and Uganda, to Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda and elsewhere — and now in Sudan. We keep repeating “never again,” but because we close our eyes, it comes back again and again, stronger than ever.

The ineffectiveness of U.S.

actions and policies were apparent even as late as the first week in November, when the Sudanese army and police surrounded several refugee camps in Darfur and denied access to humanitarian groups — making it clearer than ever that the African Union monitors are powerless to intervene. (The timing of the action — during the U.S. elections, which diverted American public attention — is surely no coincidence.) The U.S. and U.N. protested the action, but the security situation has deteriorated to the point that many relief organizations have had to withdraw their staff. And press reports of killings and other acts of barbarism taking place against black civilians and internally displaced people continue.

In short, even after two U.N. Security Council resolutions, threats of sanctions, an African Union summit in Libya, and American assistance to airlift a small group of A.U. troops, the Khartoum government still felt confident enough to send its troops into the Al-Jeer Sureaf camp housing 5,000 refugees and lay it to waste. The State Department spokesman could only say that the Bush administration “stands with the international community in holding the government of the Sudan responsible for the violations and requests immediate return of the camp residents.”

Not only did our diplomacy fail more than a million people in a far-off land. We failed in our contingency planning, our preventive and pre-crisis actions. We also failed to build an effective international structure that could act preventively. There is no reason we cannot give the United Nations the kind of in-house capacity and funding to intervene quickly with humanitarian support and blue helmets quickly in instances of genocide. There is also no substi-



tute for addressing crises early, doing high-level preventive diplomacy, and going all-out to support those efforts; both the U.S. and the European Union need to develop more effective methods of early crisis identification and monitoring. We also need to be prepared to form “coalitions of the willing,” perhaps working through NATO and other organizations, when the U.N. voting system blocks action — as we did in Kosovo. For their part, the media also need to make a greater commitment to covering conflicts like the one in Darfur and to do so early, prominently and in-depth, with some examination of their larger implications.

For American foreign policy and for America’s stature as the leader of the world, the implications of all this are staggering — yet they are not counted in any real way by either our

leaders or by much of our public.

Some observers have concluded that in the post-9/11 era, the American public is preoccupied with domestic terrorism. It is also supposedly disillusioned about conflicts that seem to have no end, particularly those (like Iraq) into which they feel they may have been improperly led. In the process, we seem to have grown inured to others’ suffering.

Yet a recent opinion poll conducted by the Chicago Council for Foreign Relations is instructive. While 76 percent of Americans oppose playing the role of “world policeman,” nearly the same proportion (75 percent) support the use of U.S. troops to stop a government from committing genocide against its own people, or in a purely humanitarian crisis (72 percent). Such findings at least suggest that the resistance to

foreign intervention so often cited as an excuse for looking the other way is a canard.

The next time there is a genocide — and each Darfur paves the way for the next — I hope and pray the next administration will not just say the right things, but follow up with action. Nothing less than the moral authority of the United States is at stake. ■

Harry Blaney, a retired FSO who served at the U.S. Missions to NATO and the European Community, and on the Policy Planning Staff and in the White House, among other assignments, is the president of the Coalition for American Leadership Abroad (COLEAD), an alliance of more than 50 nonprofit U.S. foreign affairs groups that includes the American Foreign Service Association. These views are his own.

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