

Women in Sudan: The Key to Lasting Peace

by Swanee Hunt with Donald Steinberg, Scripps Howard News Service, June 22, 2005

Four decades of war. Two million people dead. An African country just south of Egypt, almost as big as Western Europe. We should care.

It's been almost six months since a Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed for Sudan, bringing hope for ending the decades-long war between North and South. But the violence rages on in the Darfur region of western Sudan. All the while, the Darfur Accountability Act languishes in Congress. That's the bill senators Jon Corzine, D-N.J., and Sam Brownback, R-Kan., hope will strengthen U.S. action to end genocide in the region.

Unfortunately, prospects for a peaceful and prosperous Sudan are overshadowed by the exclusion of women from governing councils and commissions that will determine the shape of Sudan's future. For if it was primarily men with guns who came together to end the war, it's all elements of civil society—especially women—who must come together to build a lasting peace.

Earlier this year, we traveled to Sudan and Kenya and met with more than 130 Sudanese women leaders from across the country. Although largely excluded from formal political and economic systems, these women are educated, dynamic, and articulate. They've developed expertise and experience through their roles in some 70 non-governmental organizations. In many ways, these women have been the eyes, ears, and conscience of Sudanese society, often at great personal risk.

Among those we met was a tall woman in her late 20s, with midnight dark skin framed by a white flowing chador. Working for a relief operation in West Darfur, she's seen the worst. Sexual violence is a pervasive weapon of war in the region. Women in refugee camps tell of camel-riding militias and government forces, descending on one village after another, targeting civilians in the name of quashing rebellion.

Village men flee or are killed, leaving the women and their daughters to be gang raped. Such atrocities are familiar to the woman we interviewed: her father was imprisoned and her mother murdered when she was a child.

Still, she doesn't focus on regret but on how to end the violence. "If you want to change society, you have to pay a lot. We have paid in blood. We have paid in dignity. We have paid in children. Our people have been victims. But we have to forgive people and teach others how forgiveness can help bring peace."

Fully including such women is critical, both in the North-South context and in the deadly crisis in Darfur that has left some 2 million people homeless and up to 300,000 dead. Women should serve as equal partners throughout the peace process-in peacekeeping, reconciliation, disarmament, resettlement, and political and economic development.

Giving voice to the women of Sudan means ensuring they serve as peacekeepers, international civilian police, and human rights monitors. Think it over. Having women in those positions of authority means that women who've been raped or beaten by men will have someone they can come to with their complaints.

Women must also play integral roles in the demobilization, reintegration and resettlement of forces and refugees, including programs for trauma counseling.

They must contribute to drafting the constitution and serve on the oil commission and other governing commissions.

Women's organizations can and should be used to plan and distribute humanitarian assistance, since many women in refugee camps have been raped by their so-called protectors.

The African Union force in Darfur, charged with keeping the peace, must be dramatically expanded and given the resources, support, and robust mandate needed to protect civilians. Currently, these troops are prevented from engaging combatants or protecting civilians unless immediately under fire.

The Sudanese women we met also stressed the importance of ending the culture of impunity. They pointed out that amnesty often means that men forgive men for violence against women. Prosecuting perpetrators of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court is essential to restoring faith in the rule of law and convincing men with guns that there's no impunity in acting against women.

Despite the challenges ahead, the courageous women we met have high hopes for Sudan's future. The woman we interviewed was encouraged that the violence in Darfur has raised needed awareness around the world. "Even though the West does not have a magic solution," this is not just a Darfur problem or a Sudanese problem. "It's a whole world problem," she says, optimistically.

Let's act like it.