

## Don't Delay in Darfur

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, July 7, 2004

Last week, Secretary of State Colin Powell was greeted in Sudan by thousands of citizens eager, even desperate, for American assistance. Powell visited a refugee camp in the western region of Darfur, where more than 300,000 people are expected to perish this year in a brutal round of ethnic cleansing; over a million have already been forced to flee their homes.

Americans may remember Sudan as the target of President Clinton's brief bombing campaign in 1998, after the terrorist attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Osama bin Laden was based in Sudan until the government kicked him out in response to US pressure. He moved on to Afghanistan. Yet despite Sudan's critical importance in the war against terrorism, the tragedy in Darfur has unfolded with little press or political interest. In Darfur, an area the size of France, Arab militia known as Janjaweed are terrorizing black Africans. They rove the countryside on horseback, killing and raping desperately poor villagers. The Janjaweed also work in concert with government soldiers, using helicopters and MiG fighter jets to burn down villages in a scorched earth campaign.

For more than four decades, Sudan has been mired in a civil war between the Arab Islamic government in the north and black African Christians in the south. The Bush administration brokered a fragile peace agreement between those groups last year, but tragically, this recent violence in Darfur has overshadowed that achievement. Human rights groups have accused the Sudanese government of supporting the Janjaweed's genocidal campaign, designed to rid Darfur of black Africans, despite the fact that they are also Muslim. In a recent report, Human Rights Watch quoted a 22-year old farmer in Darfur, speaking about an attack on his village: "They burned everything, looted everything. They burned all the mosques that were not made of bricks. The Janjaweed took girls into the grass and raped them there." As the world witnessed in Bosnia in the 1990s, rape is again being used as a weapon of war.

The Sudanese government is engaged in an elaborate charade to hide the cruel truth of Darfur from the world. For UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's visit to the region this week, they emptied refugee camps. The government has also been denying visas to humanitarian workers, who must work in Chad or risk their lives to cross the border into Sudan.

Despite Annan's attention to the crisis, the member states of the United Nations are dithering, simply "urging"—not even "demanding"—that the government of Sudan cease the slaughter.

This international complacency makes Powell's visit all the more remarkable. As we did in Bosnia and in Kosovo, the United States is taking the lead in defending Muslims from genocide, although this time the genocide is being condoned, if not perpetrated, by a Muslim regime. Unfortunately, 200,000 people were slaughtered in Bosnia before the United States took action. In Rwanda ten years ago, the United States and the United Nations failed to act, and 800,000 people were hacked to death by machetes in a matter of weeks.

Will our intervention in Darfur once again come too late? With the United States overextended in Iraq and Afghanistan, the world can't wait for us to mobilize peacekeepers. But with solid international support, Powell's diplomatic efforts could yield results. By visiting Sudan, Powell got Darfur in the newspapers and sent a strong warning to the Sudanese government. Annan's persistence might also pay off—the African Union has agreed to send a small peacekeeping contingent, and the Sudanese government, however untrustworthy, vowed Tuesday to disarm the Janjaweed.

Some might ask why we should care about what's happening in Sudan, when we have so much on our plates in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention our own country. The truth is, Sudan is another critical front in the war on terrorism. The US government continues to designate Sudan as a state sponsor of terror. We saw what happened when a band of medieval thugs took advantage of a chaotic situation to terrorize the local population in Afghanistan—the Taliban turned the country into a sanctuary for al Qaeda. That prospect for Sudan should move us to action, if the humanitarian catastrophe doesn't.