



Editorial/Opinion

July 6, 2004

Out of time in Darfur

By Wesley Clark and John Prendergast

For the past year, the international community has shamefully acquiesced to the crimes against humanity occurring daily in the Sudanese province of Darfur.

"Janjaweed" militias, Arabs backed by the Sudanese government, are continuing to conduct mop-up operations against non-Arab villagers in a massive ethnic-cleansing campaign in the region. The current conflict flared early last year when two rebel groups in Darfur attacked government forces. The swelling crisis could leave hundreds of thousands dead in the coming months.

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Sudan last week, and U.S. officials began circulating a draft United Nations resolution to rein in the Janjaweed. The moves are welcome, but overdue.

The time has come for decisive action by the West and Africa aimed at preventing a full-scale famine and bringing peace to this long-suffering country.

A problem larger than Sudan

All of the news out of Sudan hasn't been bleak. A major international effort has almost achieved a complex peace agreement that would resolve a 20-year conflict between the government and southern-based rebels. Fighting there has killed 2 million people.

However, the international community has been so eager to secure this deal that it has turned a blind eye to the killings in Darfur. In this effort not to offend Khartoum, it also downplayed the Sudanese government's sponsorship of the insurgent Lord's Resistance Army operating in northern Uganda and southern Sudan, which has displaced tens of thousands of civilians, abducted children and massacred hundreds of defenseless civilians in the past few months.

The fighting in southern Sudan, Darfur and northern Uganda is part and parcel of the same problem: an autocratic regime in Khartoum that would rather foster divide-and-rule conflict than share power. Peace in Sudan and the region requires a major international investment focusing on finalizing peace in these three interrelated conflicts. Such a move would save hundreds of thousands of lives and hundreds of millions of dollars in relief assistance. If all three aren't addressed, a peace deal for any one of them won't be sustainable.

Although each situation requires major humanitarian responses, Darfur remains the most pressing emergency in the world today. Breaking the back of this famine will require a surge in airlift and logistical capacity. Huge quantities of food, medical, sanitation and shelter supplies are needed. African Union cease-fire observers and U.N. human-rights monitors must be deployed to stop militia attacks. The European Union and the U.S. are the only entities capable of handling such a massive operation.

If Khartoum obstructs access and starves civilians, U.N. -sanctioned humanitarian intervention may be necessary to protect the Sudanese from their government.

Acid test for the world

The Security Council resolution is a good start, but it may not be enough. More coercive action may need to be directed against the government of Sudan itself. And the U.S., the U.N. and others should begin to assign culpability for crimes against humanity.

The situation in Sudan poses an acid test for the aspirations of the African Union to be a regional force for peace, and for the ability of the U.N. to respond to such horrific crimes. A forceful diplomatic initiative combined with a robust famine-prevention effort would save hundreds of thousands of lives and bring peace to the region. This is the kind of international engagement that could begin to restore credibility to the Bush administration's efforts abroad and have a salutary impact far beyond this war-torn corner of the Horn of Africa.

Wesley Clark is the former Supreme Allied commander of NATO. John Prendergast is special adviser to the International Crisis Group.