

# The tragedy unfolding in Sudan

## VIEW

*Sudan's president, Omar al-Bashir, promised to cut all red tape on relief deliveries for the next three months. And the foreign minister, Mustafa Ismail, voiced confidence that the janjaweed will be reined in. Relief officials aren't sure.*

TOM MASLAND AND  
HOLLY BAILEY

Embassy to demand UN military intervention aimed at 'ending the genocide of Sudan's African people'. An army of activists has taken up the cry. "This is genocide unfolding," says Physicians for Human Rights investigator John Heffernan. US Committee for Refugees spokesman Steven Forester concurs: "It's incumbent on the president to strongly call this by its rightful name. Time has run out."

What's in a name? Plenty, when the topic is genocide. Applying the term to Darfur would give the Bush administration little choice but to put the matter before the UN Security Council, and would probably mean sending in UN troops. The United States is among the 135 parties to a 1948 UN convention denouncing genocide as 'an odious scourge' and requiring the participating nations to punish and prevent 'acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group'. Bill Clinton's advisers froze at the prospect during the 1994 bloodbath in Rwanda (much to their later regret). But in recent weeks the Bush administration has crept to the very edge of using the word to describe Darfur. Both US secretary of state Colin Powell and UN secretary-general Kofi Annan flew in last week to give the Sudanese government one last chance to stop the killing. "What we are seeing is a disaster, a catastrophe," Powell told reporters in Khartoum. "We can find the right label for it later. We've got to deal with it now."

Can Khartoum really be trusted to reverse course? Desperate barely begins to describe Darfur's plight. "People spoke about their water supply being poisoned, their crops being burned, their livestock stolen," says Heffernan, who recently visited refugee camps on Darfur's border with Chad. "There needs to be some kind of action. By waiting any longer, we risk the lives of tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people." The state department still lists Sudan's government as a terrorist sponsor, but in recent months the African country has begun emerging from decades of anti-Western isolation. Once a haven for Osama bin Laden, Sudan has become helpful in the war on terror since ejecting the Al Qaeda leader in the late 1990s; this May, Khartoum reached a peace agreement to end a 21-year war with rebels in the south of the country. A cooperative Sudan would be a foothold for peace in the Horn of Africa — and UN military intervention could stop that process cold.

The conflict in Darfur has been festering for decades. As drought and overgrazing have extended the Sahara, Arab herders from northern Sudan have sought new pastures in Darfur, although its land is anything but lush. Last year hard-pressed villagers launched a revolt, and Khartoum enlisted the help of lawless Arabs known as the janjaweed — 'armed men on horseback' — to put it down. Marauding bands killed wantonly, pillaged the countryside and not only raped local women but branded them. "The Sudanese government created a monster," says Paula Claycomb, a UNICEF official in Khartoum, "and they're having trouble putting it back in the cage."

The White House hasn't given up hope. At the end of last week's visit, Powell announced that Khartoum had agreed to an expansion of the African Union's 120-member military monitoring team in Darfur. Annan told a group of refugee women that he was trying to win guarantees of their safety so they could go home and plant new crops before too late in the current rainy season. Sudan's president, Omar al-Bashir, promised to cut all red tape on relief deliveries for the next three months. And the foreign minister, Mustafa Ismail, voiced confidence that the janjaweed will be reined in. Relief officials aren't sure. "Each visit brings promises of protection and assistance," a statement from Medecins sans Frontieres complained. "But people are still waiting." There ought to be a word for dying like that. —*Courtesy Newsweek*

THE VENUE WAS THE message. Still, in case the point somehow escaped anyone in the crowd at Washington's Holocaust Memorial Museum, the rally's organisers pounded the word relentlessly: 'Genocide!' They were talking about the ongoing crisis in Sudan's Darfur region, where government-backed Arab militias have savagely driven roughly 1 million black villagers from their homes and land. Relief officials say 300,000 or more of the victims could die in the next few months of hunger and disease. Protesters gathered again in Washington last week outside the Sudanese