

Is there hope for
Darfur?

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HOW many deaths, as the old song asks, will it take till they know that too many people have died? According to western governments, aid agencies and other ostensibly independent organizations such as Amnesty International, the toll thus far in Sudan's Darfur region is between 30,000 and 50,000. In addition, more than a million people are believed to have been displaced, with many of them — mostly children and women — languishing in refugee camps across the border in Chad.

There has been talk of military intervention, not least by Britain. However, in its resolution on the issue late last week, the United Nations Security Council made no such threat. It even edited the word "sanctions" out of the text, upon the insistence of Russia, China and Pakistan, replacing it with the less specific "measures". Under the resolution, the government in Khartoum is now expected to disarm the Janjaweed militia within 30 days or else.

What that "else" may be has not been spelt out, to the consternation of some of the aid agencies, which are said to be concerned that the dilution of the resolution makes its implementation less likely, but to the apparent relief of the objectors. In the event, Russia supported the US-drafted text, but China and Pakistan abstained.

Beijing's stance is readily explicable: the China National Petroleum Company is in charge of the oil concession in southern Darfur, and the nation also happens to be the

WORLD VIEW

By Mahir Ali

would buy a second-hand war.

It doesn't necessarily follow, however, that they are lying in this particular case. Why would they wish to spread rumours about Sudan?

Well, for one there's the need for an issue big enough to distract attention from the mess in Iraq — and, for that matter, Afghanistan, which too bears little resemblance to a success story. Then there is the opportunity, invaluable in propaganda terms, to portray Arabs as the agents of repression and mayhem in Darfur. And don't forget the aforementioned oil.

On top of that, Sudan was home to Osama bin Laden from 1991 to 1996. True, the govern-

claimed two million lives. It is possible that the Darfurian revolt, spearheaded by the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), was based on the perceived success of the SPLA in wringing concessions through violence.

The SLA and JEM's chief complaint was that their region has been neglected by Khartoum. The government responded militarily, and refugees have reported air attacks as well as ground assaults by Bashir's forces against tribes associated with the rebellion. Of even greater concern, however, have been the atrocities blamed on the Janjaweed "Arab" militia, ranging from the mass murder of non-combatant villagers to a systematic policy of rape.

The dreadful phrase "ethnic cleansing" has been employed to describe these actions, and if a recent report by Amnesty International — which offers gruesome details of rape, often gang rape, not least against minors, as well as a range of other serious human rights abuses — is anything to go by, then genocide is not a misnomer in the context of Darfur. And it is said that the Janjaweed are being armed and encouraged by Khartoum.

These charges could — and perhaps should — have been viewed with scepticism had they emanated exclusively from the White House and Whitehall. But Amnesty, the Red Cross and Medecins sans Frontieres are considerably more credible sources of information. Yes, they can err, they can falter, they can be misled — but they do not knowingly spread lies. And their reports from Darfur are mostly based on first-hand experience.

That does not automatically make it a black and white issue. As the author

If the killings don't stop within days, intervention — hopefully with Khartoum's acquiescence — would be advisable. The African Union should be able to put together a sufficiently large force for the purpose. If not, the UN could step in. But not as a proxy for another Anglo-American neocolonial adventure. US troops would be hopelessly out of depth amid the complexities of Sudan, and would probably exacerbate the problem.

... happens to be in the biggest foreign investor in Sudan. Islamabad's complaint was that the final text lacked the "delicate balance" required by a complex situation. On the face of it, this could be construed as a cop-out: Pakistan did not wish to risk annoying the friendly government of a fellow Muslim state, despite being aware of its involvement in atrocities.

If that is the case, it clearly isn't a particularly honourable — or defensible — stance to adopt. Any government unwilling to protect a segment of the population under its jurisdiction, or complicit in choreographed killings, deserves more than censure and sanctions. An administration incapable of providing security to citizens forfeits its right to govern.

It's worth bearing in mind, however, that among the governments that have been making the biggest noise about Darfur are the same folks who plied us ad infinitum with incontrovertible evidence about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The US Congress has labelled the Sudanese strife as genocide, while Britain's prime minister Tony Blair has, somewhat ominously, spoken of "a moral responsibility to deal with this by any means that we can".

As Sanders Research Associates analyst John Laughland noted in *The Guardian* on Monday, "Mr Blair has invoked moral necessity for every one of the five wars he has fought The bombing campaign against Iraq in December 1998, the 74-day bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, the intervention in Sierra Leone in the spring of 2000, the attack on Afghanistan in October 2001, and the Iraq war last March were all justified with the bright certainties which shone from the prime minister's eyes."

And when no WMD were found, we were told bad intelligence was to blame, not the noble warriors who had relied on it. Despite being exposed as serial offenders against the truth, their moral certainties remained undimmed and undented. They are, on the face of it, not the sort of salesmen from whom one

ment of General Omar Hassan Al Bashir kicked him out under US pressure — and neither the Americans nor the Saudis were keen to take custody of him, so he was allowed to fly to Afghanistan. But in the eyes of Washington's more rigid neoconservatives, Khartoum may deserve a taste of shock and awe for having hosted him in the first place.

Actually, it got a whiff back in 1998, when an American missile strike destroyed Al Shifa, a pharmaceuticals factory on the outskirts of the capital. The US said it was a plant for manufacturing chemical or biological weapons. It wasn't. Just bad intelligence, presumably. And Bill Clinton never apologized.

Of course, none of this means there isn't a vast catastrophe unfolding in Darfur. Outbursts of large-scale tribal bloodletting are by no means unknown in Africa. Earlier this year, the 10th anniversary was marked of the massacres perpetrated by Hutus against Tutsis in Rwanda. An estimated 800,000 people were killed. The rest of the world watched in horror, but did nothing. A decade on, the bloodstains remain — but they exist alongside remarkable successes in reconciliation.

Ten years before the Rwandan nightmare, sub-Saharan Africa was ravaged by a monumental drought. Ethiopia and Somalia grabbed most international attention at the time, but Darfur was affected too.

Sudan, which happens to be the continent's largest country, has been particularly unfortunate in terms of afflictions widely associated with (albeit by no means exclusive to) Africa: maladministration and instability. It has been wracked by civil war more or less consistently since independence in 1956, and military rule has been the norm.

The eruption of troubles in Darfur last year coincided with the conclusion of a peace treaty between Khartoum and the largely Christian and animist Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), following a 21-year conflict that is believed to have

and Sudan specialist Alex de Waal puts it: "Characterizing the Darfur war as 'Arabs' versus 'Africans' obscures the reality. Darfur's Arabs are black, indigenous, African and Muslim — just like Darfur's non-Arabs." The racial elements in the conflict appear to be little more than convenient confections: like most other instances of strife, it is essentially a contest over limited resources. This is borne out by reports that the Janjaweed have taken over settlements whose inhabitants have fled or been killed. So there may well have been some justification for Pakistan's complaint about an insufficiently nuanced Security Council resolution. Khartoum also disapproves of the resolution but says it will try to fulfil its demands. The African Union is already involved in monitoring a ceasefire between the government and the Darfur rebels. If Bashir is willing to disarm and push back the Janjaweed, Darfur should require no more than huge quantities of humanitarian aid — preferably delivered by independent agencies than European or American troops.

If the killings don't stop within days, intervention — hopefully with Khartoum's acquiescence — would be advisable. The African Union should be able to put together a sufficiently large force for the purpose. If not, the UN could step in. But not as a proxy for another Anglo-American neo-colonial adventure. US troops would be hopelessly out of depth amid the complexities of Sudan, and would probably exacerbate the problem. And Europeans have done too much damage in Africa to qualify as saviours.

In conclusion, an intriguing irony. Were American forces to be deployed in Darfur, they would logically look upon the SLA and JEM as allies. The JEM enjoys the blessings of Sudanese Islamist leader Hassan Al Turabi. And Turabi was a friend of Osama bin Laden. That could conceivably put the US on broadly the same side as the Al Qaeda chief. Not for the first time, though.

Email: mahirali2@netscape.net