

Intervening for oil  
or genocide? *rights*

If proof were needed that Tony Blair is off the hook over Iraq, it came not during the Commons debate on the Butler report on July 21, but rather at his monthly press conference the following morning.

Asked about the crisis in Sudan, Mr Blair replied: "I believe we have a moral responsibility to deal with this and to deal with it by any means that we can." This last phrase means that troops might be sent — as General Sir Mike Jackson, the chief of the general staff, immediately confirmed — and yet the reaction from the usual anti-war campaigners was silence.

Mr Blair has invoked moral necessity for every one of the five wars he has fought in this, surely one of the most bellicose premierships in history. 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. Blair even defended Bill Clinton's attack on the al-Shifa pharmaceuticals factory in Sudan in August 1998, on the entirely bogus grounds that it was really manufacturing anthrax instead of aspirin.

Although in each case the pretext for war has been proved false or the war aims have been unfulfilled, a stubborn belief persists in the morality and the effectiveness of attacking other countries. The Milosevic trial has shown that genocide never occurred in Kosovo — although Blair told us that the events there were worse than anything that had happened since the second world war, even the political activists who staff the prosecutor's office at the international criminal tribunal in The Hague never included genocide in their Kosovo indictment.

And two years of prosecution have failed to produce one single witness to testify that the former Yugoslav president ordered any attacks on Albanian civilians in the province. Indeed, army documents produced from Belgrade show the contrary. Like the Kosovo genocide, weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, as we now know, existed only in the fevered imaginings of spooks and politicians in London and Washington. But Downing Street was also recently forced to admit that even Blair's claims about mass graves in Iraq were false. The prime minister has repeatedly said that 300,000 or 400,000 bodies have been found there, but the truth is that almost no bodies have been exhumed in Iraq, and consequently the total number of such bodies, still less the cause of their deaths, is simply unknown.

Company. China is Sudan's biggest foreign investor.

We ought, therefore, to treat with scepticism the US Congress declaration of genocide in the region. No one, not even the government of Sudan, questions that there is a civil war in Darfur, or that it has caused an immense number of refugees. Even the government admits that nearly a million people have left for camps outside Darfur's main towns to escape marauding paramilitary groups. The country is awash with guns, thanks to the various wars going on in Sudan's neighbouring countries.

Tensions have risen between nomads and herders, as the former are forced south in search of new pastures by the expansion of the Sahara desert. Paramilitary groups have practised widespread highway robbery, and each tribe has its own private army. That is why the government of Sudan imposed a state of emergency in 1999.

But our media have taken this complex picture and projected on to it a simple morality tale of ethnic cleansing and genocide. They gloss over the fact that the Janjaweed militia come from the same ethnic group and religion as the people they are allegedly persecuting — everyone in Darfur is black, African, Arabic-speaking and Muslim.

Campaigners for intervention have accused the Sudanese government of supporting this group, without mentioning that the Sudanese defence minister condemned the Janjaweed as "bandits" in a speech to the country's parliament in March. On July 19, moreover, a court in Khartoum sentenced six Janjaweed soldiers to horrible punishments, including the amputation of their hands and legs. And why do we never hear about the rebel

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For two years, anti-war campaigners have chanted that there should be "no blood for oil" in Iraq, yet they seem not to have noticed that there are huge untapped reserves in both southern Sudan and southern Darfur. Hence, there is need to treat with scepticism the US Congress declaration of genocide in the region.

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pry unknown.

In 2001, we attacked Afghanistan to capture Osama bin Laden and to prevent the Taliban from allegedly flooding the world with heroin. Yet Bin Laden remains free, while the heroin ban imposed by the Taliban has been replaced by its very opposite, a surge in opium production, fostered by the warlords who rule the country.

As for Sierra Leone, the United Nations human development report for 2004, published on July 15, which measures overall living standards around the world, puts that beneficiary of western intervention in 177th place out of 177, an august position it has continued to occupy ever since our boys went in: Sierra Leone is literally the most miserable place on earth. So much for Blair's promise of a "new era for Africa".

The absence of anti-war scepticism about the prospect of sending troops into Sudan is especially odd in view of the fact that Darfur has oil. For two years, campaigners have chanted that there should be "no blood for oil" in Iraq, yet they seem not to have noticed that there are huge untapped reserves in both southern Sudan and southern Darfur.

As oil pipelines continue to be blown up in Iraq, the West not only has a clear motive for establishing control over alternative sources of energy, it has also officially adopted the policy that our armies should be used to do precisely this. Oddly enough, the oil concession in southern Darfur is currently in the hands of the China National Petroleum

fighting, or about any atrocities that they may have committed?

It is far from clear that the sudden media attention devoted to Sudan has been provoked by any real escalation of the crisis — a peace agreement was signed with the rebels in April, and it is holding. The pictures on our TV screens could have been shown last year. And we should treat with scepticism the claims made for the numbers of deaths - 30,000 or 50,000 are the figures being bandied about - when we know that similar statistics proved very wrong in Kosovo and Iraq. The Sudanese government says that the death toll in Darfur, since the beginning of the conflict in 2003, is not greater than 1,200 on all sides. And why is such attention devoted to Sudan when, in neighbouring Congo, the death rate from the war there is estimated to be some 2 or 3 million, a tragedy equalled only by the silence with which it is treated in our media?

We are shown starving babies now, but no TV station will show the limbless or the dead that we cause if we attack Sudan. Humanitarian aid should be what the Red Cross always said it must be — politically neutral. Anything else is just an old-fashioned colonial war — the reality of killing, and the escalation of violence, disguised with the hypocritical mask of altruism. If Iraq has not taught us that, then we are incapable of ever learning anything. —Dawn/Guardian Service

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