

The New York Times

ON THE WEB

July 15, 2004

Sudan's Ravines of Death

By JOHN PRENDERGAST

IN NORTHERN DARFUR, Sudan — While Secretary of State Colin Powell, Secretary General Kofi Annan of the United Nations, and several members of Congress were in government-controlled areas of Darfur a few weeks ago, I crossed into Darfur's rebel-held territory. This is the part of Sudan that the regime doesn't want anyone to see, for good reason.

I expected to see a depopulated wasteland rife with deteriorating evidence of the ethnic cleansing campaign pursued by the government of Sudan. The regime, in response to a rebellion begun by primarily non-Arab groups in early 2003, armed the Janjaweed militia, giving them impunity to attack.

I did indeed see numbing evidence of such a campaign in this Muslim region of Sudan, which is populated by Arabs and non-Arabs. Burned villages confirmed harrowing stories we had heard from Darfurians who were lucky enough to make it to refugee camps in Chad. About 1.5 million people have been left homeless, and as many as 300,000 may be dead by year's end. In village after village that I visited, the painstakingly accumulated wealth of the non-Arab population of Darfur -- their livestock, their homes, their grainstocks -- had been destroyed in a matter of minutes.

I was not prepared for the far more sinister scene I encountered in a ravine deep in the Darfur desert. Bodies of young men were lined up in ditches, eerily preserved by the 130-degree desert heat. The story the rebels told us seemed plausible: the dead were civilians who had been marched up a hill and executed by the Arab-led government before its troops abandoned the area the previous month. The rebels assert that there were many other such scenes.

The government's deadly portfolio in Darfur already includes the wanton burning and bombing of villages, the raping of women and girls, and the denial of humanitarian aid, all of which have so far claimed tens of thousands of lives. But judging from the scene in the ravine, executions may also be part of the assault.

My colleague Samantha Power, the author of "A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide," and I traveled together through the refugee camps and the rebel-held villages. Refugees in Chad claimed their loved ones had been stuffed into wells by the Janjaweed to poison the water supply. We went looking for these wells and found them covered in sand, in what might be construed as an effort by the Sudanese regime to cover its tracks.

While Western dignitaries visited the camps teeming with refugees from Darfur and elsewhere,

I encountered large numbers of displaced civilians inside the rebel-held areas of Darfur, where no camps exist and not a drop of international assistance has been delivered. There are potentially hundreds of thousands of survivors who have fallen through the cracks. Some of them say they are afraid to travel to government-controlled camps and unable to make it to the border. They are running out of food.

It is urgent that the United Nations, donors and nongovernmental organizations demand access to these desolate areas, to deliver aid to the people left behind.

And it is not enough to collect testimonies only from refugees in the government camps, as the State Department is beginning to do. Investigators must cross into the rebel-held zones of Darfur to exhume evidence and conduct inquiries there as well.

Obviously, in such a dire situation security is paramount, both for the delivery of humanitarian aid and for the creation of conditions to allow Darfurians to return to their homes. For all the visibility of Darfur lately, the United Nations and others have accepted a Sudanese plan under which the wolf will guard the henhouse. The international community has called on the government to disarm the same militias it helped create and arm, and to use the government police to patrol the same camps the regime has been terrorizing. A mere 300 African Union troops spread over an area the size of France are meant to ensure the government's change of heart.

This formula guarantees that six months from now the Janjaweed will still be in a position to kill, rape and pillage, leaving unchallenged the ethnic cleansing campaign that has changed the map of Darfur.

In one interview after another, Sudanese refugees and those displaced but still within Sudan's borders told us that they would never trust the government to disarm the Janjaweed, that only an international force could protect them. Sufficient numbers of elite Rwandan and Nigerian forces, now conceived of as the bulk of the African Union contingent, could lead such an effort if they were properly financed, equipped and otherwise supported by Europe and the United States.

There has been a great deal of tough talk since the visits of Mr. Powell, Mr. Annan and others, but the United Nations Security Council so far has failed to act decisively. It is time to move directly against regime officials who are responsible for the killing. Accountability for crimes against humanity is imperative, as is the deployment of sufficient force to ensure disarmament and arrangements to deliver emergency aid. The sands of the Sahara should not be allowed to swallow the evidence of what will probably go down as one of the greatest crimes in our lifetimes.

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