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We must stop the slaughter in Darfur

By Tom Lantos | May 4, 2004

THE INTERNATIONAL community cannot continue to tolerate the slaughter of innocent civilians in the state of Darfur, western Sudan, or the duplicitous acts of the Sudanese government that let the perpetrators turn their backs on justice and saunter away. Arab militias, called the Janjaweed, are being used to terrorize groups of African origin -- the Fur, Zagawa, Berti, Massilite, and Tunjur -- to drive them off their land.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has called for a humanitarian cease-fire in Darfur, and has warned that outside military action may be needed to protect civilians and ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid. Indeed, in light of escalating violence in Darfur and a deteriorating humanitarian situation, immediate intervention by the international community is required. Ten years ago, we failed to act in a timely fashion in Rwanda, and the consequences were horrendous. Preventive intervention now may keep a similar tragedy from befalling Darfur.

While Sudan uses stalling tactics to delay a "north-south" peace agreement with the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement, it simultaneously is waging a ferocious campaign against the indigenous African groups of Darfur. In little over a year, Khartoum's regular military forces and government-sponsored Arab militia, the Janjaweed, have killed thousands of civilians, forced more than 100,000 into exile in neighboring Chad, and displaced more than one million people.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Sudanese government has supported indiscriminate killings of civilians, gang rapes, looting of private property and humanitarian aid, burning of villages, abductions, forced migration and general intimidation. The US acting assistant secretary of state for Africa, Charles Snyder, said that the violence and suffering in Darfur have made it "one of the worst humanitarian crises in Africa."

In spite of growing pressure for intervention, Khartoum is mounting a campaign of intimidation against the UN Human Rights Commission, delaying the release of a critical report and watering down a recent resolution. More troubling, Khartoum also is engaged in efforts to conceal evidence that might implicate its officials and allies in the militias for gross human rights violations. Members of the Janjaweed militia, already identified as human rights offenders, are being issued official death certificates so that they do not have to stand trial for their crimes. There are reports that Janjaweed members are being flown to the Red Sea Province on the return routes of the planes that bring humanitarian supplies to Darfur and are issued military identification for the Sudanese army to prevent human rights investigators from identifying them as perpetrators.

The US government should have no illusions that what is taking place in Darfur is ethnic cleansing. The Sudan is a government determined to use every opportunity, whether through peace negotiations or war, to expand its grip on local resources, impose Sharia law on non-Muslims, and to propagate a hateful racial and cultural ideology to maintain political hegemony over the diverse communities in Sudan. The United States must lead the international community to pressure the Sudanese government to halt the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians, open access to humanitarian aid, and agree to a strong monitoring mechanism for the cease-fire agreement. This must include a robust role for the entities that have played key roles in the peace negotiations: the UN, the United States, the Africa Union, and the European Union. Further, the government of Sudan must engage in substantive political dialogue with the Sudan Liberation Army and Justice and Equality Movement as agreed in an early April cease-fire accord, in order to find a lasting peace in Sudan.

If the Khartoum regime resists international pressure, the international community must be prepared to counter the intransigents of the regime. Anything less puts a lie to the often repeated call for "never again" to tolerate the targeted persecution of an entire people. Khartoum must stop this tragedy now and prevent the further destruction of innocent lives.

Until the issue of Darfur is settled, America should withhold normalization of relations with the Khartoum regime. If they fail to respond, the US government must consider targeted sanctions for those individuals most responsible for the crisis in Darfur, freezing their personal assets and denying them entry to the United States. America and the international community need to act quickly to bring to justice the perpetrators of these heinous acts, and to end the climate of impunity for future human rights violators.

Representative Tom Lantos of California is the ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee. ■

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