

The International Reaction to the Darfur Crisis: A Humanitarian Point of View

Fabrice Weissman

2007

*Transcript of a presentation given at Columbia University during the conference Sudan
Divided, The Challenge to Humanitarian action, February 22, 2007.*

Le *Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) a été créé par Médecins sans frontières en 1999. Sa vocation : stimuler la réflexion critique sur les pratiques de l'association afin d'en améliorer l'action.

Le Crash réalise des études et analyses portant sur l'action de MSF dans son environnement immédiat. Elaborées à partir des cadres et de l'expérience de l'association, ces textes ne représentent pas la « ligne du parti » MSF, pas plus qu'ils ne cherchent à défendre une conception du « vrai humanitaire ». Leur ambition est au contraire de contribuer au débat sur les enjeux, contraintes, limites – et par conséquent dilemmes – de l'action humanitaire. Les critiques, remarques et suggestions sont plus que bienvenues, elles sont attendues.

The *Centre de reflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) was created by Médecins Sans Frontières in 1999. Its objective is to encourage debate and critical reflexion on the humanitarian practices of the association.

The Crash carries out in-depth studies and analyses of MSF's activities. This work is based on the framework and experience of the association. In no way, however, do these texts lay down the 'MSF party line', nor do they seek to defend the idea of 'true humanitarianism'. On the contrary, the objective is to contribute to debate on the challenges, constraints and limits –as well as the subsequent dilemmas- of humanitarian action. Any criticisms, remarks or suggestions are most welcome.

The International Reaction to the Darfur Crisis: A Humanitarian Point of View

Fabrice Weissman

I want to emphasize that the comments I am going to make on the international response to the crisis in Darfur are from the perspective of a medical humanitarian organization. The main objective of a humanitarian organization is to bring vital assistance to crisis affected populations. It is not to fight for human rights in and of themselves, nor is it to reestablish peace and security. This doesn't make my position more right or more wrong, it is merely specific.

From this perspective, there are four basic points I would like to make before the floor opens for discussion.

First, at the height of the massacre, there was almost no international reaction. Between 2003 and mid-2004, humanitarian agencies were left alone to push the Sudanese authorities for better access. Second, the public campaign describing the war in Darfur as a racial war, a genocide or an ethnic cleansing policy has had mixed consequences from a humanitarian point of view. Third, despite the fact that the Darfur crisis is far from being resolved, the international community has however managed to set up a massive aid operation which is sustaining the life of 2 million displaced people. Lastly, the issues that relief agencies are currently confronted with will not be solved by an international military deployment.

The Darfur crisis came to prominence within diplomatic arenas and in western media by February/March 2004. This was thanks to activists such as Eric Reeves, Nicholas Kristof and UN officials, first Mukesh Kapila and then Kofi Annan. By then, however, one million people had already been displaced and the bulk of the massacres had been committed.

Was the magnitude of the crisis unknown by key players? No. There had been several assessment missions to Darfur between September and December 2003 (UN, USAID, French Ambassador, NGOs), information was available from Darfurian refugees in Chad. This knowledge did not translate into timely diplomatic activity. The main reason is that the international community was deliberately ignoring the Darfur crisis in order to preserve the north-south peace process. By December 2003, while Darfur was in flames, the US State department was hoping to conclude a final deal between Khartoum and the SPLA and to invite Omar el Bashir and John Garang to Washington D.C. for the state of the union address to celebrate the peace.

For key international players involved in Sudan, the Darfur crisis was embarrassing: to address it would have complicated the negotiation about the CPA. To a certain extent, in 2003 and early 2004, Darfurians were sacrificed for the sake of the Naivasha peace process.

This changed in March and April 2004 for several reasons. Most prominent were the declarations of Mukesh Kapila, followed by Kofi Annan's calls for discussions about the use of force in Darfur, notably in relation to the granting of access to humanitarian assistance by Khartoum. These were relayed by powerful media campaigns.

As a matter of fact, the qualification of the crisis as either a genocidal or ethnic cleansing campaign, at the time of commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the start of the genocide in Rwanda, one year after the invasion of Iraq, made pressure on the Sudanese government more intense. To appease the international community, Khartoum's government conceded the deployment of a massive aid operation.

This advocacy campaign, anchored in a racial characterization of the conflict, had however mixed consequences.

Yes, it did help to open Darfur to international assistance. By May 2004, the government had lifted visa and travel permit restriction, and 90% percent of Darfur was open to relief assistance. As an illustration, MSF was able to scale up its activities from 2 projects run by 8 expatriates serving 100 000 people in dire circumstances, to 25 projects run by 200 expatriates. By December 2004, there were 900 international relief workers in Darfur.

Paradoxically, on the other hand, this opening of Darfur did not translate immediately into increased relief assistance. First, funds for relief operations did not immediately follow through this opening, in particular for the UN World Food Program. Second, many relief actors grappled with how to balance their activities between so called “protection issues” and more operational matters like food distribution, safe water provision, or digging latrines. That this occurred in the context of Darfur should not be a surprise: the relentless media campaign understandably led many to focus on genocide or ethnic cleansing as being THE “protection issue”, and overshadowed other concerns.

If Darfur was the scene of a holocaust, if displaced camps were extermination camps, the priority was not to increase relief assistance but to wage a war against the Sudanese regime and its allied militias. Anything short of a military intervention was deemed morally unacceptable.

One has to bear in mind, that in April 2004, the Government of Sudan had completed its destruction campaign in north and west Darfur. Almost all villagers considered as sympathizers to the guerillas because of their ethnic origin had already been displaced by the destruction of their homeland and the massacres. By that time, people were decimated not by violence but by malnutrition and diseases, especially water borne diseases. This was shown by MSF and WHO mortality surveys, which documented high mortality rates in some of the displaced camps. Yet, several agencies still dedicated most of their energy to advocacy rather than the delivery of assistance.

Finally, the description of the Darfur crisis as genocide being conducted by “Arabs” against “Africans” led to demonize all Arabs, who were thus perceived as mass killers. This translated into nomadic communities being denied assistance, even when they had fled violence. This led to unnecessary deaths among non-combatants and obviously antagonized armed elements among nomad communities, whose agenda was by no means always identical to that of Khartoum and who controlled substantial parts of the rural areas, roads in particular. As a direct consequence of this marginalization, there were no – or very few – attempts to negotiate access with the nomads’ representatives, the consequences of which are still being paid.

That said, in spite of the ambiguities I just mentioned and noting again that the Darfur crisis is far from being resolved, the international community however has managed to set up a massive aid operation which is sustaining the life of at least 2 million people.

Since 2005, and despite the relocation of staff and the recent departure of a 4-person team from Médecins du Monde (MDM), there are still 13,000 humanitarian aid workers in Darfur, more than 80 NGOs, and 12 UN agencies. WFP is doing outstanding work, distributing more than 30 000 MT of food over more than a hundred sites. For those who knew the paralysis of the aid system during the famines in Sudan in 1980’s and in the 1990’s, it’s quite an achievement.

The results are speak for themselves: in most IDP camps, mortality and malnutrition rates have fallen far below emergency and even pre-war thresholds. Today, fewer people are dying in Mornay than in Khartoum's suburbs. Malnutrition rates are higher in South Sudan than in Darfur.

This should not overshadow the fact the security remains precarious at best, that people live in constant fear, with no future in sight. IDP camps are best described as burgeoning slums surrounded by violence, and several nomad and rebel areas remain underserved as yet.

The recent security situation has deteriorated, most notably after the signing of the DPA on May 5, 2006 and the vote on the Security Council resolution 1706 on August 31, 2006.

The upsurge in violence is related to interlocking factors: increased banditry, fragmentation of the armed groups – both within the rebellion and the militias, and the resumption of hostilities between the GoS and some armed rebel groups, all set against the backdrop of increasingly militarized local conflicts between neighbouring communities and a growing state of lawlessness.

Like other aid groups, MSF has endured increased attacks on roads and in towns. Always a feature of operations in Darfur, attacks became more violent and more frequent by the second half of 2006, with the teams being beaten, threatened with death, sexually harassed and humiliated on several occasions. Over this period, 40 MSF vehicles were attacked on the roads and our facilities suffered three major armed robberies. Overall, 96 NGO vehicles were hijacked on the roads in 2006.

As a result, we cannot travel road. We depend on air services run by WFP to move personnel, and on private contractors, who have their own security arrangements, to carry medicines and relief goods. But we can still provide aid in big IDP camps, assisting 500,000 people who are highly dependent on humanitarian assistance and whose health situation is for the time being under control.

The resumption of hostilities according to more diversified patterns has led to new population displacements and increasing numbers of war-wounded. We have only been able to attend a small number of the displaced: around 80,000 IDPs out of 250,000. At our three surgical facilities, we performed 400 surgical interventions on war-wounded, mainly combatants, over the past 6 months. This figure has to be compared with the 480 war-wounded, all civilians, treated by MSF in Mornay alone over a three-week period during the scorched earth campaign of 2003-2004.

These two elements – banditry and resumption of hostilities – combine to form a picture where it is still possible to maintain ongoing operations, and very difficult to access the newly affected populations, although at a rising toll on the safety of aid workers in both cases. Is this a consequence of the mounting chaos of warfare or the result of a more deliberate strategy by one – or several – of the belligerents?

On the one hand, the formation of new armed groups deprived of a logistical supply and coherent chain of command must surely explain part of the security issues, translating into the development of gray areas which do not fall under the territorial control of one group or another. For sure, the 96 vehicles looted in 2006, which is a new pattern, is definitely linked to that evolution.

On the other hand, the wanton brutality of recent assaults on aid workers, especially rapes, seems to be linked to a deliberate strategy by the GoS. Khartoum and its allied militia aim at confining aid organizations to garrison towns or even expelling them from Darfur (notably north Darfur), as well as countering threats of international intervention by taking humanitarian workers hostages. It is a message: "If you insist on wanting to send UN troops, it will cost the lives of several relief workers."

The fact that the targeting of aid workers took a marked turn for the worse after the vote on UN Security Council resolution 1706 lends credence to this analysis.

In any case, the GOS bears grave responsibility in the escalating violence against aid worker. Whether or not it has explicitly ordered some of the most vicious attack, it has made them possible to happen by orchestrating the chaos and denouncing all foreigners as enemies of Sudan.

I would like to conclude with the following three points.

- | a) Whether or not it would result in significantly increased protection for the population, a non consensual military intervention would lead to a collapse of humanitarian activities in Darfur – just as it did in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The use of international military forces won't help aid agencies reach people in need – and is very unlikely to translate into less violence against civilians.
- | b) In the meantime, what would help aid agencies is meaningful pressure on the parties involved, to push them to respect the life of civilians and the integrity of relief agencies. Meaningful pressure is not what has been called “megaphone” diplomacy – those empty threats only meant to appease squeamish constituencies and that only serve to create a hostile environment in Sudan, where all humanitarian actors are denounced as pawns to a wider interventionist and anti-Islamic agenda.
- | e) Finally, let me reemphasize that there must be a clear separation of roles between different stakeholders – relief agencies, human rights organizations, UNMIS, governments, activists. Humanitarian agencies must stay away from calls for peace-keeping and military action, and concentrate on how best to reach and assist people trapped by crisis. There is a lot to do and it is worth it.