

An Appeal for Darfur: Killings and Demagogy

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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.

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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.

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The French advocacy group, Urgence Darfour, has just issued an appeal calling on the European nations “to immediately send an international peace force” to Darfur to “protect the population against widespread massacres” and “establish secure humanitarian corridors.” Five French presidential candidates have agreed to similar measures. This is a risky and dangerous initiative.

The large-scale massacres in Darfur have already taken place. Some tens of thousands of civilians accused of supporting the rebellion because of their ethnic origin were killed during the Sudanese government’s counterinsurgency campaign, carried out between March 2003 and December 2004. Based on 58 mortality studies (included 16 conducted by Médecins Sans Frontières), the Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters reported 131,060 conflict-related deaths in the September 2003- June 2005 period.¹ One-quarter of the victims were murdered (41,000). The others died of hunger and disease while fleeing the killings, the burning of their villages and the destruction of their livelihood.

Although still at unacceptable levels, violence against civilians fell significantly beginning in late 2004, and then began to rise again. Since the second half of 2006, the United Nations mission in Sudan has recorded an average of 200 violent deaths per month among civilians, peaking above 400 in September-November. This renewed outbreak of violence is linked to a resumption of fighting between the government and rebel groups that did not sign the May 5, 2006 peace accord. However, it also results from the splintering of armed groups (rebels and paramilitaries) into rival factions, as well as from increased conflicts among heavily-armed neighboring communities. The reason that the number of violent deaths is below that of 2003-2004 is quite simple: a large part of the territory affected by this new wave of violence had already been emptied of people during the 2003-2004 scorched-earth campaign.

The killings are distributed across a region the size of France that is home to six million people. At least half live in government-held cities and camps, where violence is more contained. According to African Union and United Nations military experts, it would take a lot more than the 20,000 blue helmets called for under Security Council Resolution 1706 to reestablish order and prevent new killings—assuming, of course, that the parties to the conflict accept this deployment.

That is not the case, however, as the Sudanese government is opposed. Ignoring its refusal would mean invading western Sudan or, in other words, declaring war on the Sudanese government, without any assurance that such an action would enhance civilian safety. An international intervention in Darfur presents tougher problems than in Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone. Those were small areas, held by well-identified armed groups, and the overwhelming majority of the people living there agreed to foreign intervention. An invasion of western Sudan could end in a bloodbath that would include civilians, like Operation Restore Hope in Somalia (1992) and Operation Iraqi Freedom. In addition, a non consensual intervention would inevitably result in the collapse of ongoing aid programs—as in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq during the offensive phase.

As we write, more than 13,000 humanitarian aid workers (including 2,000 from MSF) twelve United Nations agencies and eighty non-governmental organizations are deployed in Darfur. Thanks to a

¹ D. Guha-Sapir & O. Degomme, *Darfur : Counting the Deaths (2). What are the trends?* December 15, 2005, CRED.

vast network of air and road corridors, they are providing life-saving assistance to approximately two million displaced persons. Although living conditions in the camps remain precarious, mortality and malnutrition rates are well below emergency thresholds (and in many camps, well below pre-war levels). This is a first for anyone who remembers the aid system's paralysis during the large-scale famines in Sudan during the 1980s and 1990s.

On the other hand, attacks against humanitarian workers have intensified over the last six months. This has increased the risks for current aid work and has made it very difficult to reach new victims. Some of the attacks are perpetrated by armed gangs *from all sides* (including the rebels), who readily kill aid workers to seize their vehicles and other logistical resources. Other cruel and deadly attacks are the result of a deliberate strategy on the part of the Sudanese government, which appears to be pursuing two objectives. First, it seeks to distance aid groups from areas with military operations, and, second, to thwart international aid activities by taking humanitarian workers hostage. The dramatic increase in attacks targeting aid workers after the vote on Resolution 1706 makes that quite clear.

The only way to reduce violence in Darfur is to resume negotiations among the government, rebel groups and paramilitary militias. Joint action on the part of the international community addressing civilian needs for aid and protection is thus critical. Unfortunately, and at the risk of undermining one of the most effective aid operations of the last twenty years, a group with the standing to summon the major presidential candidates has chosen to participate in bellicose rhetoric rather than encourage European governments to commit firmly to a policy of mediation. One can worry that our presidential candidates have blindly signed on to the recommendations of a group more concerned with justifying the war against the Sudanese government than with the immediate fate of the people in Darfur.