

As others have said before me, while the United Nations may not be able to take humanity to heaven, it must act to save humanity from hell. The last two years have been little short of hell on earth for our fellow human beings in Darfur.

-- Kofi Annan, U.N. secretary general, address to the U.N. Security Council, Feb. 16, 2005.

Whereas scholars estimate that as many as 400,000 have died from violence, hunger and disease since the outbreak of conflict in Darfur began in 2003, and that as many as 10,000 may be dying a month;

Whereas it is estimated that more than 2,000,000 people have been displaced from their homes in camps in Darfur and Chad;

Now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That it is the sense of the Senate -- That the weekend of July 15 through 17, 2005, should be designated as a National Weekend of Prayer and Reflection for Darfur, Sudan.

-- U.S. Senate Resolution 172, House Resolution 333, June 2005.

Whenever world leaders have said "Never again," it has happened again.

Crimes have been committed against helpless humanity, hells on earth created. After the fact, when the numbing scale of death and destruction has become evident, the question inevitably has surfaced: How could it have come to this? Not overnight, for certain. In Darfur, as elsewhere, there are long roots to the present horror.

Late in January, a fact-finding inquiry commissioned by the U.N. Security Council outlined how conditions and events have come to take a genocidal turn in Darfur...

The report showed a Sudan roiled by political and social tensions, mired in more than 20 years of civil war between a powerful Arabic north and oil-producing southern states, populated mainly by ethnic African groups, politically marginalized and resistant to the Islamic central government. The cost of that war, which ended in 2004, is an estimated 2 million dead and 4.5 million forcibly displaced from their homes.

In the arid western states in the Darfur region, where the Arab and African tribes are all Muslim, the tension point wasn't religion but the control and use of land. As drought and an encroaching Sahara Desert reduced water and pastures, the nomadic cattle-herding Arabs clashed more frequently with the farming communities, which are mostly ethnic African. They fought over available land to establish and sustain settlements.

Further, new land laws enacted by the central government in Khartoum in the 1970s aggravated the pressures. New policies changed traditional systems of land ownership and administrative structures in the states, giving extensive powers to federally appointed administrators. The result was that traditional methods of mediating land disputes were undermined, and political loyalty to the central government became an increasingly significant element in land ownership. More ominously, ethnic identities that had been muted historically took on prominence as the raids into farming villages increased.

Two rebel groups organized in Darfur in 2001 and 2002 against the nomadic Arab incursions. The rebels organized as the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army and the Justice and Equality Movement. Weapons flowed from Libya and Chad to the west of Darfur. Rebels added to their arsenals through successful attacks on government posts such as military installations and rural police stations.

The government in Khartoum, unprepared and stretched by the north-south war, lacked the resources to engage the rebellion in the west.

The U.N. report suggested that Khartoum practically outsourced its military effort

Interests of the government and the nomadic Arabs converged. The militia, or the "Janjaweed,"

could pursue its quest for land under the cover of fighting a rebellion, with support and wide leeway granted by the government. The Janjaweed waged its war on the civilian population in the countryside, sacking and burning villages and committing atrocities.

The government repeatedly denied it was working in tandem with the Janjaweed.

Eyewitnesses say otherwise

When reports of the Darfur crisis circulated in 2003 and 2004, the central government sealed off the region, routinely denying access to humanitarian groups. Aid workers still decry the frustrating bureaucracy involved in securing travel permits.

Seven months ago, the Security Council learned the extent of the crisis from its own commission of inquiry, which said that government forces and militias conducted indiscriminate attacks, on a widespread and systematic basis, including "the killing of civilians, torture, enforced disappearances, destruction of villages, rape and other forms of sexual violence, pillaging and forced displacement throughout Darfur.

Today, 400,000 have died from violence, hunger and disease. Two million forced off their lands seek such refuge as is possible in overcrowded camps in the region and in Chad. Normal life and farming disrupted, some 3 million in Darfur face hunger.

The hell that is Darfur today is an indictment of the international mechanism to protect vulnerable populations while there is still time to do so. It reflects the capacity of individual national interests to trump the obvious need for unified and sustained policies to stop crimes against humanity.

The African Union has mediated several cease-fires between Khartoum and the rebels, all of which are quickly broken by both sides with impunity. The Security Council is reluctant to extend peacekeeping operations, only too willing to let the African Union take care of African problems. China and France, with investment concerns in Sudan's increasingly important oil industry, are adamant against economic sanctions on Khartoum.

The African Union has little capacity on its own to finance a peacekeeping operation of any significance. It has barely managed to put 3,300 peace monitors in Darfur, with plans to increase the size of the force to 7,000 by the fall. Estimates of troop strength that would effectively protect the region range from 12,300 to 44,000.

The Bush administration and Congress were admirably forthright in denouncing the tragedy in Darfur as genocide. The administration pressed the Security Council this spring to approve tougher sanctions, imposing a travel ban, freezing the assets of individuals suspected of war crimes and restricting military flights into Darfur.

Pressure came from Congress as well. A bipartisan group of senators, among them Ohio Republican Mike DeWine, successfully attached a Darfur Accountability Act to the emergency supplemental bill. The legislation sought new and more extensive Security Council sanctions against the Sudanese government, a no-fly zone in Darfur, \$75 million to support African Union peacekeeping efforts, a special envoy for Sudan and an extension of the current arms embargo to cover the government of Sudan.

Alas, determination wilted. Equivocation has set in. The supplemental bill passed in May, with \$50 million for peacekeeping and \$90 million for humanitarian efforts but stripped of the other accountability measures. The administration has grown concerned about extending the arms embargo and sanctions, fearful such sternness might give the Sudanese government cause to withdraw cooperation in the war on terrorism. In effect, to fight terrorism, the administration is uncomfortable about a proposal to withhold arms from a regime that has created hell on earth. Never again? The promise must sound very hollow on the deserts of Darfur.