

Members of the United States Congress joined with leaders of private relief and faith-based organizations Wednesday to focus renewed attention on the continuing crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan. Religious groups across the country are participating in a Weekend of Prayer and Reflection for Victims of Genocide in Darfur from July 15 through 17 to try to force action to stop the killing, which has claimed an estimated 400,000 lives over the past two years and left 2.5 million more in jeopardy.

In an unusual display of bi-partisanship at the U.S. Capitol, 20 Republican and Democratic Senators and Representatives spoke out, calling for a firm response to the ongoing crisis and urging Americans to join in prayer for the victims. "There is no difference between speaking out in support of something or remaining silent, if both allow genocide to occur," Rep. Steve Israel (D-New York) said. "We have an obligation to speak out for those who can't speak for themselves."

Rep. Melvin Watt (D-North Carolina), who chairs the Congressional Black Caucus, agreed that prayer could have an important impact. "We know that prayer is an important part of movement," he said, "and we know that reflection and introspection is an important element of mobilizing people to action."

Several speakers called for stronger action on the part of the U.S. government. Rep. Donald Payne (D-New Jersey), who has made frequent visits to the region, said the United States has been "too lax" in dealing with the Khartoum regime

Payne supports a resolution introduced last month by the Republican chairman of the House International Relations Committee, Henry Hyde (R-Illinois), calling for sanctions against individuals responsible for genocide or war crimes in Darfur.

Another cosponsor, Rep. Charles Rangel (D-New York), said the Bush administration "must maintain its pressure on the Sudanese government and clearly convey to them that any improvement in relations between our two countries is contingent on resolution of the Darfur crisis."

Several speakers made reference to the connection that American religious communities feel to those suffering around the world. "But it's not a Jewish or Catholic issue," said Rep. Henry Waxman (D-California). "It's an issue for all of us, all of humanity," he said. "If we are serious about 'Never Again,'" said Rep. Nita Lowey (D-New York), "let today be just one step along this long and arduous road."

Representatives of several humanitarian organizations at Wednesday's briefing weighed in with policy prescriptions. John Prendergrast of the International Crisis Group outlined several priorities for the international community in its dealings in Sudan, emphasizing civilian protection as paramount. "We need to keep Darfur in the public conscience," he said.

Salih Booker of Africa Action cited the unprecedented nature of the Congressional resolutions declaring the killings in Darfur a 'genocide'. But he said the "the single most important priority" has to be protecting lives in Darfur.

According to Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, stopping the killing will require "a significantly larger force with the financial and logistical capability" - an African Union force with a mandate from the UN Security Council to intervene to protect civilians.

"It must happen and it must happen now," he said, concluding his remarks with the traditional Jewish adage: "Pray as if everything depended on God; act as if everything depended on you."

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