

In September 2005 at the UN World Summit, with vociferous support from the UK, it was agreed that the world should recognise that sovereignty entailed a responsibility to protect one's citizens, and that in consequence if any government either could not or would not, that responsibility should transfer to the international community. But at the same time this grand declaration was being agreed, the government of Sudan was failing to protect the people of Darfur, and the international community, including the UK, was also failing to act.

There was, of course, plenty of rhetoric. The US government announced that the killing amounted to genocide - a word that all had avoided in the case of Rwanda because it was assumed the word would trigger the responsibilities of the Genocide Convention and thus a duty to intervene. Many UK ministers visited Sudan and Darfur, including the Prime Minister, the Foreign and Development Secretaries and various junior ministers. They expressed concern, and increased humanitarian aid was pledged because displaced people have to be fed, but no effective action was taken to provide protection.

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The Security Council held many discussions, and the US and UK in particular claimed to be very concerned. But they were not willing to mandate a UN force with peace enforcement powers, because they did not care enough about the people of Darfur and because they were distracted and weakened by events in Iraq. Instead, the African Union agreed to provide the troops, but they lacked planes, helicopters and other equipment. The EU and others helped with finance, but the money kept running out. Although those who were deployed performed admirably, with inadequate numbers and logistics the killing and raping continued and the ethnic cleansing has been "successfully" completed. Two million people are living in vulnerable camps, dependent on handouts with little prospect of getting back to their lands.

It is now proposed - at last - that the African Union mission should be incorporated into a UN mission, and argued that it should have a stronger mandate. If this is agreed, money will cease to be a problem. But the mission will not be effective unless countries with strong logistics are willing to join the force. Africa can supply soldiers but needs funding and logistics if African Union efforts are to succeed.

The Government has talked a lot about Africa and promised a lot to Africa. On Darfur, it has failed Africa. And this is an example of a wider problem. No amount of aid and/or debt relief will bring development to Africa unless conflicts are ended and state structures capable of providing order and development put in place. This is the problem in Sudan, Congo, Angola, Cte d'Ivoire and many other places.

It is already too late to prevent the ethnic cleansing of 2 million people in Darfur. In the next few months, we shall learn whether the political will exists even to begin to reverse this process.

The writer served as Secretary of State for International Development between 1997 and 2003

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