

TERRY GROSS, host:

Nicholas Kristof and John Prendergast are joining us today. Kristof is a columnist for The New York Times. He won a Pulitzer Prize this year for his, quote, "graphic, deeply reported columns that at personal risk focused attention on genocide in Darfur and gave voice to the voiceless in other parts of the world," unquote. Kristof made his sixth trip to Darfur in March. John Prendergast is a senior adviser at the International Crisis Group. He's been working on conflict resolution in Africa for over 20 years. He worked in the White House and the State Department in the Clinton administration and has worked for a variety of NGOs and think tanks in Africa and the US. Prendergast has made many trips to Sudan, three in the past two years.

GROSS: But UN peacekeeping force would be there to enforce the peace agreement, but what's really the status of the peace agreement now?

Mr. PRENDERGAST: there's only one of the three factions of the various rebel movements has signed this deal. The deal is a very imperfect one. It's got a lot of problems with implementation and in the concessions that were wrung out of the government being very inadequate. the two remaining factions of the rebels are saying have till the end of the month to sign it. The mediators don't appear to be interested in reopening the negotiations to actually change anything. But the rebels are saying, the two factions are saying, 'Well, you're going to have to because otherwise we're not going to sign.'

GROSS: Nicholas Kristof, you recently in one of your columns called the UN a wimp when it comes to Darfur. What are your thoughts on how effective UN peacekeepers would be if they are in fact dispatched there?

Mr. NICHOLAS KRISTOF: there would be problems, I'm sure, but they would be infinitely better than nothing or than the African Union force. And the AU force is poorly equipped, it's hopelessly outgunned by the Janjaweed. But even that tiny force, 7,000 people total and 5,000 with guns, has made a huge difference in the places they go. And if you had a robust UN force with a decent mandate and well armed and mobile, you know, that would make a difference both on the ground in providing security and in sending a warning to the Sudanese government that it needs to rein in the Janjaweed

GROSS: Why did you call the UN a wimp?

Mr. KRISTOF: Because the UN has been very diplomatic in the way it has gone about this. And so we have endless discussions in the Security Council and endless expressions of concern by officials, and yet on the ground, we have a genocide that just gets worse and worse and worse. And the UN hasn't, and UN officials as well, haven't, I think, adequately stepped up to the plate and acknowledged this to be what it is which is a huge affront to human civilization. it's incumbent on the UN to kind of step out of its ordinary paradigm and show a little more urgency. And that is what, three years into this, it has not done.

GROSS: John Prendergast, what are the odds, do you think that the government of Sudan will accept UN peacekeepers?

Mr. PRENDERGAST: I think eventually they will accede to the deployment of UN force. They want a few things either in writing or understand in principle before that happens. First, they like the African Union force there because it's an ineffectual force... because they still have an agenda that they're undertaking which is to destroy any roots of the rebellion, to support the changed demographic dynamic that has occurred as a result of the ethnic cleansing in the context of the genocide. And so they don't want a very effective UN mission, so they're going to fight every aspect of it so that it is a limited mandate and the least number of troops with the least amount of firepower. And I think that you're going to see that.

The second thing, which they'll never say publicly, but what they really are aiming at when they oppose the UN so vociferously, is they simply don't want the UN force to act as a Trojan horse to eventually execute any potential indictments that the International Criminal Court might hand down in the context of its investigation of the crimes against humanity that have been committed principally by or at the orders, at the behest of and the orders of senior government of Sudan officials... ()

Mr. PRENDERGAST: I'm hard-pressed to remember during the 20 or so years I've been working on these kinds of issues where we've had such an enormous gulf between the solemn rhetoric one invokes with the term genocide and the feeble action that results on the other side of the use of that term in terms of actual American and international response, confrontation of this genocide. And I think only in the last few months have we seen an uptick in the real, serious debate about policy options. And I think that comes directly as a result of growing public citizen pressure I think a very visible manifestation of how citizen pressure affects policy and is affecting policy now is that rally that occurred a couple of weeks ago in Washington DC on the mall. You know, it was, whatever, 40, 50,000 people which the numbers certainly are dwarfed by some of the larger rallies that have occurred in that very spot, but it was the people who were on the stage. I mean, it was a collection of religious leaders from all faiths and secular leaders. The people who have an influence with this administration, and they sat up and said, 'Well, we'd better pay attention to this.' And you saw within a few days President Bush dispatched Condoleezza Rice's deputy Bob Zelleck to Nigeria

GROSS: Well, John, one of the things you point out is that one of the things the Bush administration is up against is that they want Sudan as an ally in the war on terror, so by taking action against the genocide, they risk alienating that same government

Mr. PRENDERGAST: (..)The big question is: Is the only way to get that information to constructively engage and incentivize the path to greater cooperation and thus diminish our advocacy and our robustness with respect to how we confront the genocide or if we pressured this government to give up that information instead of just begging and asking for it, if we pressured the government to give it up, would they do it anyways? And the history of US relations with the Sudan since this regime came to power in the military coup in '89 is that when we do pressure them, especially multilaterally, they do come through...

Mr. KRISTOF: I think that that concern about counterterrorism, cooperation is one reason why we haven't been more active, but I think there are a couple of others... I think one has been concern that if we lean on Sudan too hard, then they will stop cooperating on the separate

north-south peace deal which the Bush administration rightly regards as one of their important achievements. And I think frankly the other is that, you know, it's a long way away, the administration doesn't really know kind of exactly what to do because there is no neat, clean policy option just to do nothing. And I think that that is frankly also why other people have been way too quiet.

Bill Clinton could really have been helpful if he had made a big deal of Darfur. And he has been way too quiet on this issue as well

GROSS: In bin Laden's latest tape he called on Muslims to go to Sudan and stockpile land mines and other weapons in preparation for a long-term war against UN peacekeepers and other infidels. So what are the odds that if UN peacekeepers go into Darfur that Sudan will become like another front for the jihad.

Mr. KRISTOF: I think it would depend to some degree on what country those troops were from. It's not going to be another Iraq and indeed it's pretty incredible that Osama bin Laden is in fact endorsing a genocide in which Muslims are the victims. But it is perhaps true that if the troops that went in were Americans, were Western Europeans, and if the whole UN force, you know, was perceived as Western Christian force, then I think that among Sudanese Arabs, that would be perceived, especially in the aftermath of Iraq, as, you know, Westerners kind of invading the Arab motherland, and I think that is something we should try to avoid, and I think it's one good reason to have a large component of Muslim troops, whether they be Turks or Moroccans or Bangladeshis, in that UN force. ()

Mr. PRENDERGAST: And one thing we haven't talked about but is worth adding that, you know, we've been so focused on Darfur, but Chad is on the brink of collapse because of Sudan's efforts to undermine it, or in part because of Sudan's efforts to undermine it. And even if Darfur works out and the peace agreement holds, which I think is a really long shot, but even if that happens, then you could still have Chad falling apart in the next couple of months. I give it maybe a 50-50 chance of collapsing before the end of the year, and if that happens, then you will have just a nightmare. It will be Darfur, but on a much bigger scale.

GROSS: Nick, your latest trip to Sudan was along the Sudan-Chad border, so you got a glimpse of some of what you're describing firsthand, and one of the stops that you made was to a town that was certain it was targeted for slaughter. What made them so sure that they were going to be attacked?

Mr. KRISTOF: The Janjaweed had been approaching from the east and had gone kind of village to village and in every case, there were several hundred Janjaweed, who then surrounded the village and started wiping people out and burning it. And by the time I got to village of Koloy, the Janjaweed were in the very next village. They'd attacked I think five villages the previous day. And they had supposedly spread word that they were to go after Koloy next. The Chadian army had come to defend Koloy the previous evening, but then had realized how many Janjaweed there were and had then fled. At the moment that I arrived in Koloy, the police were fleeing and a lot of people had fled, but, you know, there were a lot of families that had somebody who was old, who couldn't go. And so people there were just kind of resigned to be raped and slaughtered

and, you know, it was an unbelievable thing to see in the 21st century, to see these people resigned to being slaughtered because of their skin color and tribe.

GROSS: This is another one of those wars in which rape is a kind of standard part of the war

Mr. KRISTOF: This is not rape as a byproduct of chaos or war. This is rape as a government policy to terrorize populations. And it's effective as a government policy partly because there is such a stigma about it and also because women are terrified and so they don't talk about it. And so they manage to terrorize populations to drive them out to depopulate these areas without generating the kind of, you know, bad publicity and body counts that they do when they just massacre everybody. And to add to the terrorization, they not only gang rape these people but they then mutilate them afterward to mark them as rape victims. And you come across these same people, you know, in vastly different areas of Darfur.

And I must say that, you know, when I see government officials in this country or at the UN who don't bother to speak up about Darfur, about what they're seeing, and then I talk to these rape victims who have the incredible courage to describe what has happened to them, to brave that stigma and to risk arrest by the Sudanese for speaking to a reporter about it, you know, I just wish that we could emulate one little fraction of the courage those women show and speak out as well about that kind of injustice

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