

The clock ticks. Sudan heads for disaster

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The world seems to be turning away from the refugees of Darfur — but the United Nations has a duty to act

A COUNTDOWN of less than 90 days has begun until the vulnerable people of Darfur are abandoned by world leaders who cannot make a decision — whether to protect them or leave them at the mercy of a Government that has killed at least a quarter of a million and driven millions more from their land. The scene is set for the world's worst humanitarian crisis to tip from bad to worse.

The head of the African Union mission to Darfur, Baba Gana Kingibe, has said it is willing to hold the fort in Darfur until the end of the year. But if there is no date soon for the UN to deploy troops in Darfur, then the African Union mission will not wait; the 7,000 African soldiers will be pulled out on September 30.

For the past three years the Government of Sudan has supported its proxy, the Janjaweed Arab militia, to perform a brutal genocidal operation closely backed by Sudanese forces. Darfur Africans cannot farm for fear of attack. No harvests mean that more than three million are dependent on international food aid. In the absence of the African Union and with no certainty that the UN will protect them, a few million hungry people will predictably turn to the only forces showing an interest in their survival — one of several rebel factions.

The Government of Sudan has probably calculated that, by playing for time, the rebel groups will attempt to provide protection for their own people. An escalation of fighting will prevent access for aid agencies and the media, and Khartoum will have the excuse it needs for a resumption of air attacks on Darfuris.

The Janjaweed leaders have had time to reflect that they have not achieved their mission to rid Darfur of black Africans. The onslaught by the mounted militia three years ago led to thousands of villages being burnt. Their aim of destroying the Darfuris will be easier now that two million people are congregated into refugee camps because they will argue that, as the camps are recruitment grounds for rebels, they are legitimate targets.

Neutralisation of the Janjaweed is a key rebel demand — indeed the Government of Sudan has been responsible for disarming them for two years. But Khartoum's broken promises leave a legacy of mistrust. By giving the Janjaweed free rein, the Government goads the rebels into not taking peace seriously. Furthermore, many rebels are not satisfied that the peace agreement reverses the underlying problems in Darfur.

Genocide is the extreme end of a process that starts with social, political and economic exclusion of a group from society. The Darfur peace agreement still deprives Darfur Africans of significant political representation, thereby maintaining their exclusion. It is hardly a wonder, then, that two of the three rebel factions have not signed up to it, and that the third is threatening to pull out unless the UN deploys in Darfur.

The UN Secretary-General is visibly frustrated, especially with the powerful nations of the world. "A certain political will is required for action — and I don't think we have that kind of political will,"

Kofi Annan stated last week at the African Union summit in Gambia. Political will may only be induced if the public demand that their leaders protect Darfur.

After Iraq, there is a fear of deploying forces in another Muslim nation, even though this would be a humanitarian intervention with no agenda other than protecting people from genocide. However, if we dither much longer, there will be charges that vulnerable Muslims in Darfur are being neglected just as the Muslims in Bosnia were abandoned a decade ago.

The UN estimates that 17,000 troops are required to provide security and, even if they can be found, will take six months to become operational. Denmark, while president of the UN Security Council last month, showed leadership and offered troops for Darfur. Other countries should now follow. The 7,000 African soldiers already on the ground will be needed. Even though Britain is overstretched in Iraq and Afghanistan, it should offer assistance.

The success of a UN mission will be judged first on whether food aid reaches those who need it; secondly on whether rape and violence ends; and finally by a reversal of the ethnic cleansing, returning people to villages in safety.

To achieve this, the mission must have a strong enough mandate. Most peace-support operations are under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. This will allow them to disarm and, if necessary, engage the Janjaweed. It would be preferable, and in everyone's interests, for the Sudanese Government to co-operate. So far though, Khartoum has categorically rejected UN intervention, calling it colonial invasion. Sudan cannot have it both ways: they have not stopped the violence, yet they don't want an outside force to do it.

At the World Summit in September 2005, leaders declared that "The international community . . . has the responsibility . . . to help to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity." They also stated: "We are prepared to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner . . . should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations."

Peaceful means are clearly inadequate and the national authorities in Sudan are manifestly failing to protect their populations. With time ticking toward a disaster that could dwarf the 1994 carnage in Rwanda, the UN Security Council must fulfil its duty and exercise its authority to sanction the deployment of a protection force, with or without Sudan's consent.

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