

A Broken System

By Morton Abramowitz and Samantha Power
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Every day editorial writers accuse the world or the United States of indifference to the suffering in Darfur. Television, after long averting its gaze, now rounds up desperate Darfurians to tell their stories. Organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group have documented the horrors, exposed the lies and pushed the world to respond. Kofi Annan, Colin Powell, Jack Straw and other luminaries have visited Darfur to see for themselves and to urge the Sudanese government to behave. Each month brings a congressional delegation -- Frank Wolf, Sam Brownback, Bill Frist, Jon Corzine -- and the returning lawmakers do what they can to generate action. Meanwhile in New York the U.N. Security Council meets regularly to wrangle over whether sanctions should be applied or the G-word used.

And what has all this strenuous activity achieved? It has helped persuade governments to feed the starving, but it has not improved the security of the people of Darfur. Indeed, the advocacy has stimulated government responses that have had the perverse effect of defusing the political pressure to stop the killings and return the refugees home.

When the flurry of interest was aroused four months ago, some 100,000 people were refugees in Chad and more than a million were displaced inside Darfur, unable to escape Sudan and confined to wretched camps. Today those numbers are thought to have increased to 200,000 and 1.5 million, respectively. The estimate of 30,000 dead has risen to 50,000. Villages in Darfur are still being attacked by Sudanese planes and Janjaweed forces, and women in camps who fetch firewood are still assaulted daily. The uprooted are destined to remain wards of the international community.

Why has the world, with all its outpourings and Security Council deliberations, failed to tackle the Darfur problem? The main answer is straightforward enough: Major and minor powers alike are committed only to stopping killing that harms their national interests. Why take political, financial and potential military risks when there is no strategic or domestic cost to remaining on the sidelines?

But why is there no such cost? First, because not enough people are dying. The estimated 50,000 deaths are far fewer than the predictions, which ranged from 300,000 to 500,000. Recent history has set the bar extremely high for concern in Africa. In Congo, where an estimated 3 million people have died over the past six years, the media and Congress have largely stayed home, and governments have gladly taken their cue of indifference. Although the previous civil war in Sudan took some 2 million lives, it was allowed to continue for almost 20 years. And in Rwanda of course, where about 800,000 were murdered, nothing was done.

Second, the delivery of humanitarian aid lets us off the hook. After an unpardonable delay, the world overcame Sudan's obstructionism to get food, medicine and plastic sheeting into Darfur. This has helped reduce the death toll, but it is a stopgap solution that keeps the media at bay and allows lawmakers and policymakers to do good deeds while avoiding the political problem at the heart of Darfur's destruction: Khartoum's sins and, to a lesser degree, a rebel movement emboldened by the belief that the United States is on its side. Now that we can all point to tens of millions of dollars in food aid, and can thankfully keep a million people alive indefinitely, the crisis has come to seem far less pressing.

Third, the existence of the U.N. Security Council hides the crux of the problem: Countries do not want to do what is necessary to prevent large-scale loss of life in messy, complex Africa. Crises such as Darfur require urgent action, and states are well aware that the Security Council cannot act urgently. It is not by accident that they throw the problem into the labyrinth of U.N. deliberations, which allows them to play the role of good international citizens, while the Security Council with its built-in vetoes from Russia and China and its built-in opposition from rotating members such as Pakistan and Algeria, prevents any serious action against sovereign nations.

The international system is broken, at least when it comes to Africa.

The Darfur death toll may as yet pale when compared with Rwanda's, but if 800,000 Darfurians were to be murdered next week, neither the states individually nor the Security Council as a whole would be prepared to muster a speedy and robust response. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a crisis in Africa -- no matter how heavy the prospective death toll -- that would generate the consensus needed not merely to feed civilians but to save them.

There is a moral and political void in the world when it comes to coping with catastrophes in Africa -- a void that will not be filled by reforming the Security Council. The problem is the states that make up the council.

Darfur shows that dedicated advocacy can move democracies to denounce atrocities and provide generous humanitarian help. What the earnest advocacy rarely does is propel the powerful to stop the killing. For that to happen, righteous clamor must reach a high enough pitch that politicians in democratic states are persuaded to do a difficult thing: take domestic political risks in pursuit of policies that do not serve their immediate interests, that can be financially costly and that provide no clear-cut exit strategies.

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