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*“Darfur: No Time to Delay Action”*

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who has made a career of not stepping on diplomatic toes, is not a man given to alarmist outcries. His latest warnings on the plight of the Darfur region of Sudan, then, demand attention.

On September 26 Annan reported to the UN Security Council that Darfur “is again descending into a vicious cycle of violence,” that the situation “is becoming more desperate by the day” and that Darfur “is again on the brink of a catastrophic situation.”

This dire assessment must be read in the context of the disaster that Darfur has already become. In three years of ethnic strife, mainly pitting black African rebels against Arab militias backed by the Sudanese government, at least 200,000 civilians, and possibly as many as 450,000, have been killed.

Another two and a half million people – nearly equivalent to the population of Chicago – have been violently displaced from their homes and villages, many now burnt to the ground. Three million Darfurians, most of them huddled for safety in squalid camps, rely on international food aid to survive. Yet hundreds of thousands remain trapped in parts of Darfur too dangerous for humanitarian agencies to reach.

How could things possibly get worse?

According to UN officials and aid workers, the answer is that unless strong steps are taken, hundreds of thousands more Darfurians are at risk of dying in the next few months. They cite the following evidence:

- Despite a peace agreement signed several months ago by the government and one rebel group – but not others – overall violence and civilian casualties are mounting.
- Humanitarian aid workers are increasingly targeted. In August three Red Cross vehicles were hijacked and a Red Cross driver killed. Large areas of Darfur are now off limits to the Red Cross. Annan explains: “Direct attacks on humanitarian operations have forced many organizations to suspend all but the most essential operations.”
- As a result, forty percent of the people in northern Darfur must now go without basic health care. Cholera has broken out in western Darfur.
- Even in displaced person camps, security is precarious and getting worse.

- Human rights violations, especially sexual violence, are escalating. Around one camp alone, the number of attacks on women and girls foraging for grass and firewood rose from ten per month, to nearly ten *each day* by mid-July. On one day 21 women from the camp were raped by armed militia; the next day 17 more were raped.

All this was known, even before the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights this week reported that in late August, armed Arab militias attacked black African villages, killing as many as several hundred civilians. The attacks “appear to have been conducted with the knowledge and material support of Government authorities.”

An undermanned, underfunded, outgunned, African Union observer force of 7,000 soldiers and police struggles to provide security for some camps and humanitarian convoys. However, they cannot begin to safeguard civilians throughout an area the size of France, where Sudanese air force bombers and helicopters support marauding Arab militias, and where guerrilla factions increasingly fight among themselves.

In late August the UN Security Council authorized a beefed-up force of some 22,000 UN peacekeepers, and “invited” the Sudanese government of President Omar Hassan al-Bashir to accept them. Bashir, not surprisingly, declines the invitation.

To date the Security Council, where China and Russia hold veto power, has not been willing to force the issue. China buys oil from Bashir; Russia sells him armaments. The United States has pressed for action, but the Bush Administration, bogged down in Iraq, has not given Darfur enough diplomatic priority.

There is developing a broad, bipartisan consensus on what is needed in Darfur: UN peacekeepers, targeted sanctions to freeze the bank accounts and bar international travel by Bashir and other regime leaders, sharing of US intelligence on Bashir with the International Criminal Court, a limited “no-fly” zone over Darfur, and perhaps even air strikes to take out the Sudanese air force.

The combination matters; if air strikes alone are undertaken, Arab militias could launch all-out attacks on camps for the displaced. So there must be enough UN boots on the ground, backed up by US air power, to protect the camps.

The issue is, Who will make all this happen? International law requires Security Council approval for such an intervention, but the Chinese and Russians so far have blocked it. While the US could supply air support, Washington has neither the troops nor the stomach to occupy Darfur, even if an Arab world already inflamed by Iraq would tolerate another US occupation. It remains unclear who if anyone will supply an effective ground force, absent Security Council approval.

There is no easy diplomatic solution, but the civilians of Darfur cannot wait. President Bush must move Darfur to the front burner. He must do all he can to persuade China and Russia to abstain from vetoing UN action. Failing that, he must do his best to rally our European allies for a NATO intervention.

Effective action must be taken. International law matters, but the lives of hundreds of thousands of human beings matter more.

**Doug Cassel's commentaries are broadcast Wednesdays during the noon hour of the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM. Views expressed are personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.**