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May 30, 2007

Worldview Commentary No. 262 on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM WBEZ

“Saving Darfur: No Saviour in Sight”

Welcome to the post-superpower era. If confirmation be needed, witness the humbling spectacle of the fruitless American efforts to end the slaughter in Darfur. In the last four years, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed and over two million forcibly displaced from their homes and farms in that region of the Sudan.

There is broad bipartisan support for efforts to save Darfur. The Bush Administration long ago termed the atrocities in Darfur a genocide. Congressional support is overwhelming. Groups from both the religious right and left join human rights advocates in public campaigns for Darfur. Newspaper editorials supporting the campaign are countless.

Yet what does the most powerful nation in the history of the planet have to show for all its concern? Precious little. A series of United Nations Security Council resolutions has been mostly hot air. American economic sanctions on Sudanese companies amount to slaps on the wrist. A weak force of African Union peace observers in Darfur has no mandate to protect civilians. One Sudanese official has been indicted by the International Criminal Court, but he remains in Sudan, with no near-term risk of being arrested.

And Sudanese President Omar Bassan al-Bashir all but openly sneers at the pressures from Washington, New York and The Hague.

Why the American impotence?

In part the answer is simply indifference. Darfur has not been high on the Administration's list of foreign policy priorities.

But there is more, much more: even if the White House were to elevate Darfur to its top priority, American power to halt the mayhem is severely constrained.

One traditional option is to send in the Marines. But we have already sent them – and the Army and the National Guard – in to Iraq and Afghanistan. We have few Marines left to send.

Even if we did, using military force can limit our options. The colossal waste of American military power in Iraq has not only failed to make that country a better place to live, it also makes it more difficult for us to use force somewhere else – such as Darfur – where it might be more justified.

After enduring our litany of phony and overblown justifications to invade Iraq, the world will no longer take at face value American protestations of purity of motive for any sort of intervention – military, economic or diplomatic – in Darfur.

If our military prowess proves hollow, then, what about our economic might? We are, after all, the world's largest economy by far.

But not in the Sudan. That country's largest trading partner, which buys most of its oil, is not the US but China. As long as China protects Sudanese oil exports, American economic sanctions are little more than symbolic.

The Bush Administration's Special Envoy for Sudan, Andrew Natsios, admitted as much when President Bush this week announced new sanctions, barring another 30 Sudanese companies from doing business with US financial institutions. The purpose and effect of this gesture, Natsios admitted, is not so much to sanction Sudan as to "send a message."

Much stronger sanctions – an embargo on Sudanese oil exports – are theoretically possible, but with world energy prices already sky high, could cause economic disruption here and abroad, not to mention the predictable ire of much of the world.

Nor has American diplomatic power prevailed. The Chinese, Russians and Africans have successfully blocked the UN Security Council from adopting any sort of tough sanctions on Sudan. Although President Bush now proposes to have the UN impose a no-fly zone, he is not likely to get it passed in New York.

The level to which the erstwhile superpower has sunk is perhaps best illustrated by a letter sent this month to Chinese President Hu Jintao by 108 members of the US House of Representatives, organized by the Chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Tom Lantos of California.

The members of Congress "request that you use your significant influence with the government of Sudan" to allow humanitarian relief and to end the atrocities in Darfur.

And if China declines to do so? Well, the letter asks, does China want next year's Olympics in Beijing to be known as the "Genocide Olympics"? Unless China does its part, the letter warns, "history will judge your government as having bank-rolled a genocide."

Now if that threat does not force China's hand, what will? Embargoing chopsticks?

Don't get me wrong. All these efforts by Congress, the White House and the Save Darfur Coalition are laudable and should be encouraged. Sooner or later, they are likely to do at least some good.

My point is simply that these are not the tactics of a superpower, capable of muscling its way at will through the world. They are instead the actions of a normal country -- one power among others -- which must look to build alliances if it wishes to affect events far away.

In the short run, for the people of Darfur, that is unfortunate. In the long run, for the people of the world, the demise of hyperpower is healthy. Unchecked and disproportionate power, as epitomized by the Administration's ill-fated invasion of Iraq, is too dangerous to lament its passing.

Doug Cassel's commentaries are generally broadcast Wednesdays during the noon hour of the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM, and rebroadcast at 9 PM in the evening. 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.