

2006

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Recommended Citation

Joireman, Sandra F. "Killing Zone: What Can Be Done in Darfur." *The Christian Century* 123, no. 24 (2006): 10-11.

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Killing zone

by Sandra F. Joireman

CHRISTIANS FROM all traditions and from across the political spectrum have been pressing President Bush to try to get more United Nations peacekeeping troops on the ground in Darfur to stop the unrelenting violence there. The National Council of Churches endorsed the UN resolution in August that called for sending UN troops. In October, Evangelicals for Darfur, a coalition of Christian leaders—including Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention and Jim Wallis of Sojourners—took out full-page ads in newspapers calling for President Bush to do more to address the crisis.

But violence against civilians continues, and the Sudanese government remains opposed to allowing UN troops in the region. The Darfur region is located in the western part of Sudan along the border with Chad. Darfur, which means “the kingdom of the Fur,” is the size of Texas.

The current conflict began in 2002 when two rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), began attacking government targets because of the Khartoum government’s perceived discrimination against African ethnic groups such as the Fur, Massaleit and Zagawha. The conflict is rooted in local struggles over land and water between the nomadic “Arabs” and the land-tilling “Africans.”

The categories of Arab and African are rather arbitrary, however. There have been decades of intermarriage between the two groups, both of which are Muslim. A split within the government of Sudan in 2000 over the correct expression of political Islam led to the declaration of a state of emergency and fueled violence between the two groups.

Under the state of emergency the Sudanese government used its expanded authority to retaliate against the uprising in Darfur. The government pays local militias, in this case the Janjaweed, to lead attacks on civilians in coordination with government aircraft. Though the government denies arming the Janjaweed, there have long been reports of coordinated attacks. This method worked very well for the government as a low-cost method of handling the armed rebellion during the civil war between the north and south that lasted from 1983 to 2005.

The goal of the government-backed fighters appears to be as much to displace the population as to stifle the rebellion. The BBC reports that over 200,000 have been killed; some sources claim that the figure is as high as 400,000. Two million people have fled their homes, with some crossing into Chad and destabilizing that country. Rape and sexual violence against women and girls caught in the conflict have been rampant. Women are often attacked when they leave refugee camps to search for firewood or water. It is difficult even to estimate how many women have been raped or killed.

Since 2004 the African Union has deployed 7,700 troops in Darfur. (It’s noteworthy that Rwanda was one of the countries to send soldiers.) This force has been grossly insufficient to protect civilians. Only 1,400 of the African Union troops are engaged in policing.

In May a peace deal was negotiated in Nigeria between the SLA and the Sudanese government, but the agreement quickly fell apart. Fighting between government-backed forces and factions of the now-splintered SLA and JEM has since been on the rise.

In August a UN Security Council

resolution extended the mandate of UN forces in Sudan to Darfur. (A contingent of UN peacekeepers was originally empowered to enter the country to enforce the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005, which ended the conflict between northern and southern Sudan.) The August resolution calls for deploying 17,300 additional peacekeepers to Darfur, including 16 police units.

But Sudan’s government objects to the sending of peacekeeping troops to Darfur. Omar Al-Bashir, the president of Sudan, has referred to the UN force as a “recolonization” effort, and the government has told African and Arab countries that if they contribute troops to a peacekeeping force, Sudan would regard that as “a hostile act.”

The International Crisis Group, a well-respected independent think tank, has argued that “full-scale non-consensual military intervention by the international community is not at this stage a defensible or realistic option.” The ICG has proposed, as an alternative, a series of actions to increase the pressure on the Sudanese government. These recommendations include freezing the assets of government officials involved in the genocide and subjecting them to international travel bans.

The ICG also advocates hiring forensic accountants to locate offshore accounts of Sudan’s ruling National Congress Party, which could be frozen if economic sanctions were to take effect; examining options for restricting investment in Sudan’s oil industry; and planning for a no-fly zone over Darfur. It is hoped that such actions would pressure the government of Sudan to accede to the Security Council resolution.

The ICG recommendations are constructive suggestions for altering the position of the Sudanese government. The U.S. should endorse these actions and should implement a no-fly zone over Darfur as soon as possible. Neighboring Chad is in-

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creasingly unstable, and the U.S. should support the deployment of peacekeeping troops along the border between Chad and Sudan to try and limit the geographical spread of the conflict.

Now that the midterm elections are

over, churches and individuals should press the president and elected representatives to address the Darfur genocide both in speeches and in action, supporting a no-fly zone over Darfur and intervention by the UN in both Darfur and Chad. ■