Killing Zone: What Can Be Done in Darfur?

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WHAT CAN BE DONE IN DARFUR?

Killing zone

by Sandra F. Joireman

CHRISTIANS FROM all tradi-
tions and from across the po-
lar spectrum have been press-
ing President Bush to try to get more United Nations peace-
keeping troops on the ground in Dar-
fur 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 lead-
ers—including Richard Land of the
Southern Baptist Convention and Jim
Walls of Sojourners—took out full-
page ads in newspapers calling for
President Bush to do more to address
the crisis.

But violence against civilians con-
tinues, and the Sudanese govern-
ment 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 Jus-
tice and Equality Movement (JEM),
begin attacking government targets because of the Khartoum govern-
ment’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 no-
madic “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 be-
tween the two groups.

Under the state of emergency the
Sudanese government used its ex-
anded authority to retaliate against
the uprising in Darfur. The govern-
ment pays local militias, in this case
the Janjaweed, to lead attacks on civil-
ians in coordination with government
aircraft. Though the government de-
nies arming the Janjaweed, there have
long been reports of coordinated at-
tacks. This method worked very well
for the government as a low-cost
method of handling the armed rebel-
dion 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 coun-
dry. 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 agree-
ment quickly fell apart. Fighting be-
tween 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 con-
tingent of UN peacekeepers was origi-
nally empowered to enter the country
to enforce the Comprehensive Peace
Agreement of 2005, which ended the
conflict between northern and souther-
n 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 presi-
dent of Sudan, has referred to the
UN force as a “recolonization” effort,
and the government has told African
and Arab countries that if they con-
tribute 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 op-
tion.” The ICG has proposed, as an al-
ternative, a series of actions to in-
crease the pressure on the Sudanese
government. These recommendations
include freezing the assets of govern-
ment 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 ef-
fct; 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 resolu-
tion.

The ICG recommendations are
constructive suggestions for altering
the position of the Sudanese govern-
ment. 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.