

Darfur

Why Canada should do more

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It is in the nature of diplomats to be optimistic: Their jobs demand that they convince themselves that solutions lie in negotiations. They must assume that those involved are participating in good faith, and that everyone is interested in resolving the conflict. Sometimes, this is true -- but not in Darfur.

Ambassador Robert Fowler's argument in last Friday's Globe and Mail that Canada should take a "softly, softly" approach to the ongoing atrocities in the Darfur region of Sudan is an echo of the world's responses to the massacres in Rwanda, Bosnia and Congo. His presumption that the Sudanese government is interested in halting the slaughter of civilians in its western provinces is belied by Khartoum's actions.

While Mr. Fowler and the African Union negotiate, the Sudanese government continues to use helicopter gunships and Antonov bombers to attack settlements and provide material support for the marauding janjaweed militias. Sudanese forces are intimidating refugees and internally displaced persons and robbing humanitarian relief workers. In its campaign to deny accountability for the atrocities in Darfur, Khartoum went so far as to arrest two members of Médecins sans frontières for publishing a report documenting the campaign of mass rape being perpetrated against Darfuris, and a man who provided translation for a conversation between United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan and a rape victim in one of the refugee camps. While the MSF workers have been released, the translator's fate is unknown.

There is no question that the AU mission is making a difference, but its effectiveness is undermined by inadequate resources and a restrictive mandate. The AU has only 2,370 personnel to provide security for an area the size of France, and while that number is set to increase to 7,700 by September, its own experts have said that at least 12,000 are needed. But even the requisite number of troops wouldn't be able to put an end to the atrocities if the AU's mandate isn't expanded to allow it to take proactive steps to protect Darfur's civilians. Otherwise, the janjaweed and Sudanese government forces will simply wait until AU forces leave an area before mounting new attacks.

One of Mr. Fowler's colleagues on the Prime Minister's Special Advisory Team on Sudan has already laid out what's needed. In The New York Times last fall, Roméo Dallaire wrote: "Sudan is a huge country with a harsh terrain and a population unlikely to welcome outside intervention. Still, I believe that a mixture of mobile African Union troops supported by NATO soldiers equipped with helicopters, remotely piloted vehicles, night-vision devices and long-range special forces could protect Darfur's displaced people in their camps and remaining villages, and eliminate or incarcerate the janjaweed.

"If NATO is unable to act adequately, manpower could perhaps come individually from the so-called middle nations -- countries like Germany and Canada that have more political leeway and often more credibility in the developing world than the Security Council members."

As many have argued, waiting interminably for negotiations to bear fruit as the slaughter continues is not the right response. Canada needs to press the AU to immediately increase the number of troops on the ground and broaden its mandate to protect civilians.

Although it's a good start, NATO must do more than airlift AU reinforcements to Darfur: It must provide them with the resources to gain the upper hand over the Sudanese forces and their vicious proxies.

Finally, if the AU proves unable or unwilling to take the actions necessary to halt the murder, rape and ethnic cleansing of the civilian population of Darfur, like-minded nations from Africa and beyond must step in and fulfill the world's responsibility to protect.

At risk are not only the lives of the millions of Darfuris targeted by the Sudanese government. The "responsibility to protect" concept was a Canadian project to build an international consensus on when and how armed humanitarian intervention should occur. In speeches before the UN and in Canada, Prime Minister Paul Martin has declared that this doctrine is integral to Canadian foreign policy. The atrocities in Darfur are the test of our commitment. Mr. Fowler's suggestion that Canada is doing the right thing by learning and discussing clearly amounts to a betrayal of R2P, a betrayal of how hard our diplomats have worked to craft an effective doctrine for intervention. Worse, it is a betrayal of our promise of "never again." If the R2P doctrine is to be more than rhetoric, we must prove it now.

Even more alarming, inaction also risks creating an odious precedent in international law. For the first time since the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide entered into force, a signatory state (the United States) has declared that genocide is actually taking place. There has always been uncertainty as to the legal obligation that signatory states are under to actually "prevent and to punish" genocide, which is why the Clinton administration was so reluctant to apply the term to Rwanda in 1994. If the world stands by in the face of what Washington has called genocide, and what the UN has called "no less serious and heinous than genocide," we will erode the very principle that all nations are obligated to take the actions necessary to prevent and punish the ultimate crime.

Negotiation is an important tool in the crisis resolution toolbox, but it must never be the only tool. As one Rwandan soldier serving with the AU mission to Darfur told a reporter, "Every night you go to sleep thinking, 'I could do more. We could do more with a better mandate.'"

Canada can do more, Mr. Fowler.

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