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Hell is still Darfur

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Darfur — Our white truck turned up the dusty hill in El Fasher, Darfur. Major John Lewis of Cold Lake, Alta., parked our AMIS (African Union Mission in Sudan) pickup next to a clay wall, beside a stall where women were selling cups of water. Five of us walked through the gate of El Fasher's government hospital. It was Friday, and patients' families gathered in the sandy courtyard, bringing food to their hospitalized relatives.

Milling about were Sudanese soldiers. Several hours earlier, four men suffering gunshot wounds had been brought in for surgery; their bus had been attacked by bandits. In a sweltering and fetid room with blood-stained cots, we met one of the bandaged casualties. Across from him was an empty cot stained by a fresh pool of blood, where a less fortunate victim of the attack had lain moments earlier. In the past 21/2 years, there have been more than 200,000 such victims. The vast majority of the dead have been non-combatants, in what some international politicians and diplomats have labelled "an attempt at genocide" by the central government.

Unlike the men we visited, most did not die in a hospital but were killed trying to escape the marauding Arab militias known as janjaweed (proxies of the Sudanese army) as they pillaged, burned, raped and shot their way across Darfur. Those innocents who escaped, some two million of them, now live in internally displaced refugee camps, sometimes only a few kilometres from their former homes.

The Darfur conflict first took root in the region's competition for scarce resources. African farmers and nomadic Arab herders vied for what little sustenance and income the region might provide them, a competition intensified by the creeping desertification of the Darfur region. The Arab Islamic government soldiers, while fighting a decades-long civil war against both African-animist and Christian Sudanese factions, ignored threadbare Darfur's needs over dozens of years.

In February of 2003, newly organized Darfur insurgents attacked several army outposts in the region to draw local and global attention to their unheard demands for equitable resources from the central government. Senior military officials in Khartoum, perhaps frustrated by their failing bid to win the civil war with the Christian South, reacted with ferocity. Villages were bombed from the air as janjaweed militiamen moved in to rape, pillage, burn and murder. More than 10,000 Darfurians died every month for almost two years. The razing of villages continued unabated until the spring of this year.

Finally, the African Union brokered ceasefire accords between Khartoum and the two main Darfurian insurgent groups - the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement - and a relative calm seemed to set in.

On May 12, to alleviate the continuing suffering of the displaced in Darfur and to assist the work of the

AMIS peacekeepers, Prime Minister Paul Martin committed \$192-million to the region. That could not have come at a better time, as it coincided with the political implementation of the peace agreement that ended more than 26 years of civil war between the Khartoum government and the principal southern insurgent militia, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement.

Although far from perfect, the peace agreement has given a measure of power to tribes and groups outside of Khartoum's elite. It established an appointed representative parliament (the National Assembly), and a formal process by which state resources will be shared regionally. It also delineated a timeline for democratic elections in three years, while a new Sudanese constitution is negotiated and ratified in the interim.

On Aug. 31, the National Assembly's inaugural session began. In Darfur, AMIS (partially enabled by Canada's commitment) was doubling its force size.

It was during this confluence of events in late September that I travelled to Khartoum and then to Darfur on a self-financed fact-finding mission, taking as an assistant University of Toronto student Max Kelly of Students Taking Action Now on Darfur. Despite repeated warnings from every corner of the inherent dangers of travelling to the region, I became the first Canadian MP to enter Darfur, and the first elected official since Mr. Martin's May 12 aid announcement.

In Khartoum, I met Canada's new chargé d'affaires, Alan Bones, who had arrived only days earlier. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of Sudan, and a passion to have Canada play a critical role in bringing long-term peace, stability and justice to the region. One had the feeling that he had been preparing for this particular posting his whole career.

I then met my parliamentary counterparts in the new National Assembly, including the assembly's general secretary, Ibrahim Ibrahim, and deputy speaker Atem Garang Deng (who had been an insurgent in the bush not long before). I also spoke with other political figures such as Hassan Al Tarab (recently released from prison, he is the ideological father of Sudan's political Islamism), and Mohamed Ibrahim Nugud of the Communist Party.

Several days later, I was able to arrange a small private plane to fly into Darfur. We left at daybreak, flying for hours over desert - not the sterile white sands of the Sahara but a yellow, orange desert with dried-out riverbeds hinting at promise. At the airstrip in El Fasher, we were met by two Canadian Forces advisers to AMIS.

As I listened to our soldiers, I grew increasingly proud of our military's conduct under extremely difficult circumstances. I also became aware of the direct consequences of Canada's military commitment of resources to Darfur - by empowering AMIS, Canada is saving thousands of civilian lives weekly.

The hell of today's Darfur must be solved on three levels: humanitarian, military and political. Although interconnected, each will require different tools.

The international NGO community is doing a phenomenal job in the displaced refugee camps. I found the people in the camps in good spirits and well-fed; there were wells, schools and hospitals. But the only reason that a humanitarian disaster in Darfur's refugee camps had been avoided was the presence of AMIS, with its attendant Canadian equipment and advisers.

Unfortunately, the military presence is only sufficient to maintain the status quo: the protection of refugee camps and areas around them. For two million refugees to return to their destroyed ancestral villages will require an expanded military presence and a long-term political solution.

While I was in Darfur, AU-sponsored Darfur peace talks began in Nigeria. Now is the time for both the international community and the United Nations to step forward and proportionately provide the kind of commitment to Darfur that Canada has already made. An expanded peacemaking capability is required while ceasefire and peace talks (which may last as long as three to six years due to political obstacles) create solutions to end this conflict.

As I stood in the El Fasher hospital looking at the blood-soaked cots, I had a feeling of foreboding. The two Darfurian insurgent groups had splintered, and we were bearing witness to their banditry. While the refugees in the camps were secure and well-fed, an increasingly disparate number of armed groups in the countryside were filling the security vacuum. For now, all that stands between them and the refugees are 6,500 AU troops and their mostly Canadian advisers. The time has arrived for an international commitment of substance, not rhetoric.

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