

Ethnic Cleansing, Again

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ALONG THE SUDAN-CHAD BORDER— The most vicious ethnic cleansing you've never heard of is unfolding here in the southeastern fringes of the Sahara Desert. It's a campaign of murder, rape and pillage by Sudan's Arab rulers that has forced 700,000 black African Sudanese to flee their villages.

The desert is strewn with the carcasses of cattle and goats, as well as fresh refugee graves that are covered with brush so wild animals will not dig them up. Refugees crowd around overused wells, which now run dry, and they mourn loved ones whose bodies they cannot recover.

Western and African countries need to intervene urgently. Sudan's leaders should not be able to get away with mass murder just because they are shrewd enough to choose victims who inhabit a poor region without airports, electricity or paved roads.

The culprit is the Sudanese government, one of the world's nastiest. Its Arab leaders have been fighting a civil war for more than 20 years against its rebellious black African south. Lately it has armed lighter-skinned Arab raiders, the Janjaweed, who are killing or driving out blacks in the Darfur region near Chad.

"They came at 4 a.m. on horseback, on camels, in vehicles, with two helicopters overhead," recalled Idris Abu Moussa, a 26-year-old Sudanese farmer. "They killed 50 people in my village. My father, grandmother, uncle and two brothers were all killed."

"They don't want any blacks left," he added.

Most refugees have stories like that. "They took the cattle and horses, killed the men, raped the women, and then they burned the village," said Abubakr Ahmed Abdallah, a 60-year-old refugee who escaped to Toukouloukouli in Chad.

"They want to exterminate us blacks," said Halime Ali Souf. Her husband was killed, and she fled into Chad with her infant.

Once refugees like Ms. Halime have fled into Chad, their troubles are not over. The only source of water for many border villages is the riverbed, or wadi, marking the boundary between the two countries, and the Janjaweed regularly shoot men who go there to get water or gather wood.

Zakaria Ibrahim was shot dead a few days ago. "He went to get sticks to build a hut," said his haggard widow, Hawai Abdulyaya, who is left with five children.

The Janjaweed regularly invade Chad to seize cattle and attack Sudanese refugees. In addition, the Sudanese Army has dropped bombs on Chadian villages like Tiné and Besa.

These skirmishes are taking place in a sparsely populated land of sand, shrubs and occasional oases. The only roads are dirt tracks barely navigable by four-wheel-drive vehicles -- except when the rainy season makes the area completely impassible. (Join me for a multimedia tour of Africa at www.nytimes.com/kristof.)

The U.N.'s Sudan coordinator, Mukesh Kapila, described the situation in a BBC interview on Friday as similar in character, if not scale, to the Rwanda genocide of 1994. "This is ethnic cleansing," he said. "This is the world's greatest humanitarian crisis, and I don't know why the world isn't doing more about it."

Countless thousands of black Sudanese have been murdered, and 600,000 victims of this ethnic cleansing have fled to other parts of Sudan and are suffering from malnutrition and disease. The 110,000 who have fled into Chad are better off because of the magnificent response of the Chadian peasants. Chadians are desperately poor themselves, but they share what little food and water is available with the Sudanese refugees.

"If we have food or water, we'll share it with them," said a Chadian peasant, Adam Isak Abubakr. "We can't leave them like this."

Let's hope that we Americans will show the same gumption and compassion. We should call Sudan before the U.N. Security Council and the world community and insist that it stop these pogroms. To his credit, President Bush has already led the drive for peace in Sudan, doing far more to achieve a peace than all his predecessors put together. Now he should show the same resolve in confronting this latest menace.

In the 21st century, no government should be allowed to carry out ethnic cleansing, driving 700,000 people from their homes. If we turn away simply because the victims are African tribespeople who have the misfortune to speak no English, have no phones and live in one of the most remote parts of the globe, then shame on us.

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