

The Crisis in Darfur

The worst direct assault on Christian communities is occurring in Sudan.

Not many Americans could locate Darfur on a map. But every American Christian ought to know about Darfur. Currently it is the location not only of the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world—according to the United Nations—but also of the worst direct assault on Christian communities anywhere. In September, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell described the Darfur situation as simple “genocide.”

Darfur is the region of western Sudan where the latest episode of one of the longest-lasting and cruelest civil wars in modern times is being acted out. Sudan, a country of 39 million located between Arabic Egypt and black Africa, has suffered from a civil war since 1983.

In that year, the Muslim Arab government based in the north—in Khartoum, the national capital—rescinded previous agreements to allow the south more autonomy and decided to suppress the region entirely by military force. The southern half of Sudan is primarily black African and largely Christian.

Of course, in any civil war no side is ever entirely innocent. The Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), which fought the government on behalf of southern Sudan, has certainly committed its share of atrocities.

But the responsibility for the more than 2 million people who have died since 1983 must clearly rest with the Khartoum regime. In the 1990s the United States blacklisted the Sudanese government for harboring terrorists (Osama bin Laden

lived there for a while). Sudan also had backed Saddam Hussein and his occupation of Kuwait in 1991.

In 1999 Khartoum declared its campaign against the south a jihad and set about trying to impose Shariah, or Islamic law, by force. Entire villages were raided and pillaged by Arab militia on horseback—women were raped and sold into slavery, the men were murdered, and children by the thousands were left without any care at all.

The situation in Darfur, meanwhile, has become a brutal microcosm of the larger Sudanese conflict. It began in February 2003 when fighting between the SPLA and the government led to the displacement of an estimated 1.6 million people and the killing of at least 70,000.

What has made the conflict especially vicious is that the Sudanese government—though it denies it—seems to have given a free rein to the brutal militia Janjaweed, which has pillaged, raped and murdered throughout the Darfur region. A U.S. State Department contract worker, after interviewing last year some 50 refugees from the region, said there was a horrifying pattern of gang-rapes of women committed by the Janjaweed, which is sometimes backed directly by Sudanese government forces.

Former congressman Tony Hall of Ohio, a committed Christian (and a Democrat), currently leads a U.S. delegation to the United Nations. He toured western Darfur in November and saw villages that had been burned and abandoned. Though the World Food Program has ample supplies and trucks to stave off starvation in the region, Hall says that fighting in the area has terrified people enough to keep them from returning to their homes.

Several U.S. congressmen and a few senators have visited Sudan and heard the same grim tales of an entire people under siege from a ruthless and unrestrained government. I visited southern Sudan (not Darfur) five years ago with three congressmen and Republican Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas.

What was most touching of all was being greeted by Christian villagers in a refugee camp that had been repeatedly bombed by the Sudanese air force. The welcoming crowd held up simple wooden crosses as we came into their camp from a nearby landing strip. They were singing, "We welcome you," over and over again.

We told them repeatedly how much we appreciated them and wanted to help them. But, sadly, it seems that no government anywhere is prepared to intervene in Sudan and halt the genocide. Christians in the United States and elsewhere can only pray—and we should—that the nightmare of our Sudanese brothers and sisters will somehow come to an end.