

LIBRARIANS TAKE A STAND ON DARFUR

by Al Kagan

On June 27, 2006 in New Orleans, the Council of the American Library Association adopted CD#50, "Resolution on the Darfur Genocide" (see page 62 for the text of this resolution). It noted that "...over the past three years between 180,000 and 400,000 civilians have been killed in the Darfur region of Sudan, 2,000,000 people have been displaced, 2,000 villages have been burned and their wells poisoned, and women and girls have been raped by government-supported Janjaweed militias." The resolution asserted that an aroused public might have made a difference but that the media has failed to do an adequate job in raising public consciousness. Therefore the ALA Council urged all ALA units and the profession-at-large to highlight and explain the Darfur genocide and called on publishers to seek and distribute relevant materials to aid public understanding on this and other genocides.

Library science students are usually taught and our literature is full of the misconception that our work should be "neutral." This usually means that we must treat all library users equally, take care to balance our collections with materials on all points-of-view, and refrain from taking social and political stands. Advocates of progressive and explicitly socially responsible librarianship generally debunk this myth of neutrality. They argue that while we should of course treat all library users with equal respect, we often fail in balancing our collections and our actions are certainly not neutral. These advocates note that library collections often pay little attention to alternative viewpoints outside the mainstream discourse and that we often self-censor ourselves when considering the purchase of materials that might offend some library users for whatever reasons. Even so, many librarians who self-censor themselves will probably agree with the theory of balanced collections even if they find it difficult or impossible to carry it out.

However the point of real controversy is often the idea that librarians and their associations must remain politically neutral. But even a glance at what we do disproves this assertion. We regularly oppose censorship and support freedom of expression. We advocate for empowering our library

users through access to information, provide literacy training, sponsor interesting programs and exhibits on controversial issues, advocate privacy for our users, and even challenge national security legislation like the USA PATRIOT Act. In all of these areas we advance our social responsibility agenda. The ALA Council has now added the Darfur genocide for our consideration and action.

The most important Africa solidarity organization in the U.S., Africa Action, now estimates more than 450,000 dead and more than 2.5 million displaced inside Darfur and another 350,000 across the border in Chad. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan recently told us that there are now also refugees in the Central African Republic. Almost 7000 people are dying each month. As a result, more than four million people now rely on humanitarian aid for food and shelter. But most Americans know almost nothing about what is going on there.

History and Context

Sudan is the largest country in Africa, a territory of more than one-quarter the size of the US, with a population of about 41 million people. Much of the country is desert. As with most African countries, Sudan was constructed by colonial powers that divided the land amongst themselves with no consideration of ethnic or cultural cohesiveness. The people of Northern Sudan consider themselves Arabs, and the northern-dominated government has ruled over the peoples of Western and Southern Sudan since independence from the British in 1956. Two long civil wars were fought between the North and the South (1956-1972 and 1983-2005). The second war resulted in two million dead and four million displaced. Sudan has many ethnic and religious groups. The Southerners are mainly Christians or hold traditional beliefs. The Westerners in Darfur are Muslims but do not consider themselves Arabs. There are three main ethnic groups in Darfur: the Fur, Zaghawa, and the Massaleit.

As a result of long-term neglect and a harsh climate with few resources, two armed groups emerged in Darfur in 2003 in rebellion against the government, the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement. The government responded by organizing and supplying an irregular militia known as the Janjaweed, which targets civilians, rapes women and girls, destroys crops and water resources, and burns villages. The security situation is currently so unstable that a number of humanitarian organizations have suspended their operations making the situation even more unbearable.

World Response

Although the US Government and leaders of several European countries have acknowledged this latest continuing genocide (remember Rwanda!),

little has been accomplished in stopping the killing. The African Union sponsored peace talks and concluded an agreement in May 2006 but not all of the groups signed. At the November 30, 2006 meeting of the African Union and UN Security Council in Abjua, Nigeria, Kofi Annan described the latest agreements. The peace process must be made more inclusive, a ceasefire must be made effective, and a three-phase process must be implemented to create a serious peacekeeping presence. In the first phase, the UN is providing the African Union with a "light support package." The second phase would be a "heavy support package." And the third phase would be a hybrid African Union and United Nations operation with troops predominantly from African countries. This presence would cost about one and one-half billion dollars per year. The Sudanese Government has agreed to this formula.

In phase one, the African Union has deployed a small, poorly resourced peacekeeping force of 7000, but it is much too small to cover such a huge area, has no mandate to protect civilians, and has a relatively small effect on stopping the atrocities. The UN Security Council passed resolution 1706 in August 2006 authorizing a UN Force of 20,000. The Sudanese government has blocked deployment in phase two, but agreed in November 2006 to a hybrid force from the African Union and the United Nations. So far, this phase three force has not be deployed, and the government of Sudan continues to support the Janjaweed although it claims otherwise.

Partnerships with the Devil

In an article in the *Washington Post* (Nov. 19, 2006), John Prendergast asked the question "So How Come We Haven't Stopped It?" Prendergast was director of African Affairs at the National Security Council in the Clinton Administration. He explains that so-called national security has overruled addressing genocide. Remember that Osama bin Laden lived in Sudan in the early 1990s. The current head of security for Sudan's government is Salah Abdallah Gosh, who was bin Laden's main contact with that government. Gosh has now partnered with the U.S. government in detaining terrorism suspects and turning them over to the U.S., expelling Islamic extremists, and handing evidence to the FBI. And that is not all, Gosh and his friends also have a connection to the civil war in Somalia where the U.S. has been secretly funding warlords and the Ethiopian occupation. Last year, Gosh was even flown to the U.S. for a debriefing with the CIA.

Other powerful countries are equally to blame. China is the largest investor in Sudan's oil industry and buys one-half of Sudan's exports. China also sells military aircraft and guns to Sudan. Russia is also a major arms supplier to Sudan and lent that government one billion dollars to purchase military jets and helicopters in October 2006. The Russians are also building an oil pipeline in Sudan.

Prendergast says that the U.S. policy of “walking loudly and carrying a toothpick” only emboldens the Sudanese Government to escalate its attacks in Darfur. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted in his farewell address “...respect for national sovereignty can no longer be used as a shield by governments intent on massacring their own people, or as an excuse for the rest of us to do nothing when such heinous crimes are committed.” He said we have not gotten much beyond “lip service.”

Conclusion

The bottom line is that powerful governments are not going to stop genocide unless there are powerful forces from below. There is already a growing student, African-American and religious movement against the lip service U.S. foreign policy. As our resolution states, our associations and libraries can help by raising public consciousness “...through collections, programs, displays, resource guides, and other suitable means.” That would be a good start, but we also need to raise funds to assist refugees and for future reconstruction. But more importantly, we need to lobby the U.S. government to stop the collaboration between the CIA and Sudan’s intelligence agency, and to vigorously support the African Union and UN peacekeeping mission. Furthermore, the U.S. and China have a deep economic relationship. U.S. pressure on China and Russia through trade negotiations could have a tremendous effect. “Never again” is still a hollow slogan when it comes to genocide. A better slogan is “Another World is Possible.”

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