

## "Focus on Lives, Not Labels"

Andrew Natsios's recent opinion piece in *The Washington Post* ("Obama, Adrift on Sudan") sounds a timely warning to the Darfur advocacy movement.

(see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/22/AR2009062202385.html>)

I've had serious quarrel with Natsios's positions in the past, when he was the Bush administration's special envoy to Sudan. He favored unrealistically low estimates of the number of deaths in Darfur, compared to those estimates from individuals such as Eric Reeves and groups such as the national Save Darfur coalition -- which may have been on the high side, but which were closer to the 300,000 death toll now generally accepted. Natsios was also part of the Bush administration's empty bluster and back-pedaling.

However, I think he is right to decry as counter-productive the continuing use of the word "genocide" to describe the present level of violence in Darfur. Julie Flint, Jen Marlowe, and other journalists who visited Darfur in 2004 have been saying this for two or three years. I've come to agree with them. Effective right now, I am changing the language on my web-site to reflect the current reality.

Genocide has a precise legal definition. [<http://www.hrweb.org/legal/genocide.html>] What happened in Darfur in 2003 and 2004 was unquestionably genocide. And Darfur is part of a genocidal pattern of violence that has been going on intermittently in Sudan for nearly thirty years. But today there are more violent deaths in South Sudan than in Darfur.

Sadly, Natsios' observation that "Advocacy groups motivate their financial supporters and volunteers by associating today's low-level insurgency with the Sudanese government's massive atrocities of 2003 and 2004" cuts to the heart of our collective tendency to use the word today, when it is no longer appropriate.

Hyperbole is no stranger to the aid industry. Alex De Waal documents such manipulation in his book, *Famine Crimes*. But even those of us who don't have a financial ax to grind are sometimes fighting yesterday's war.

Relinquishing "genocide" as a descriptor does not mean we should slacken our efforts. If anything, we should redouble our efforts to feed the Darfuris in IDP camps. The camps remain hostage not only to the Sudan government -- which kicked out various aid organizations last spring --

but to rising food prices and flagging international food donations.

"Most assuredly, avoidance of the word does not get the Obama administration off the hook. The Obama team shows signs of accommodating Khartoum to a degree that is dangerous in light of the dominant National Congress Party's history of racism and broken promises. Our government should do everything it can to prevent Khartoum from stealing the scheduled elections. (See Eric Reeves. [http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article31662.](http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article31662))

It also means the advocacy movement here in the U.S. should redirect its energies to include South Sudan, where the geopolitical struggle is now centered. Our task is to get the Obama administration to help defuse a potentially even more deadly conflict that could overshadow and consume Darfur.

If I carried away anything from my 2007 journey through South Sudan with three Lost Boys, it was the overwhelming sense from everyone we talked to -- from poor subsistence farmers to school teachers and county commissioners up to President Salva Kiir -- that if the plebiscite scheduled for 2011 under terms of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement were held at that moment, the South would vote to secede. Southerners had gained nothing from the peace.

Still no proceeds from the South's oil wealth. No schools, no roads, no medicine. Endless foot-dragging from Khartoum on the matter of resolving disputed boundaries and preparing for elections.

That powder-keg situation appears to be even truer today. And secession would inevitably mean war. The suffering and the potential suffering that drew me to the Darfur cause in 2005 drew me to the South in 2007, and draws me now.

The Obama administration must seize the opportunity to support a lasting peace in the region. That means working with Khartoum in some fashion; it certainly means working with South Sudan, providing aid and expertise to develop its infrastructure and carry out the census that is necessary for elections to be held. It means taking an active role in the UN, paying our dues, and helping to shape a coherent and effective multilateral policy vis-a-vis Sudan.

This is a challenge, considering that Sudan President Omar al-Bashir is under indictment for war crimes by the International Criminal Court, but it can be done. In the

meantime, the cries of genocide that were appropriate five years ago are today a dangerous stumbling-block.

Darfur activists can continue to play a vital role in supporting efforts to feed and otherwise sustain displaced Darfuris, and in shaping the political will to lay the groundwork for peace in Sudan.

I suggest also writing or calling Congressional Representatives and asking them to cosponsor House Continuing Resolution 159, "Recognizing the fifth anniversary of the declaration by the United States Congress of genocide in Darfur, Sudan." [[Download pdf file.](#)] The resolution briefly restates why the U.S. declared a genocide to be occurring in Darfur, recounts some of the recent history, and calls for a comprehensive approach to peace for all of Sudan.

The issues are complex. Let's address them. Our passions are precious. Let's not waste them.

Let's focus on lives, not labels.

-- David Morse