

# When Intervention is Necessary, Who Can You Call?

By Salih Booker | August 5, 2004

Genocide is a unique crime against humanity. This crime is currently unfolding in Darfur, western Sudan, as the world looks on. Yet, even as pressure grows from many quarters (including Congress) for U.S. leadership regarding Darfur, many progressives and people usually concerned about social justice feel that a U.S.-led intervention is the wrong answer. They express concern about negative historical precedents, about exploitative U.S. motivations, and about the current lack of U.S. credibility on the international stage. These are all defensible arguments. But do they render U.S. leadership an impossible option in the case of genocide?

At the heart of the debate is the question of whether we—progressives—believe that U.S. power can be used for good in Africa or elsewhere in cases of mass killings and other crimes against humanity? This is a broad question, but the carnage in Sudan presents an immediate need to answer it.

Millions of people are now at risk in Darfur as a result of a government-sponsored “scorched earth” campaign that began last year. Tens of thousands have already been killed, and more than 1 million displaced people now face what the United Nations calls the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. The U.S. administration and other governments are refusing to use the word “genocide” to describe the situation, aware that it would compel action under the Genocide Convention.

In Darfur, there is one immediate priority: stopping the killing and securing life-saving relief for nearly 2 million Darfurians. To do this, the international community must make a fundamental choice. It can either allow the government of Sudan, the author of this genocide, to determine how and when to end it and what humanitarian aid to allow through, or it can authorize an international intervention to provide protection for and security to the people of Darfur.

A UN operation cannot be assembled quickly enough. It takes about three months to put together a peacekeeping force even under the best of circumstances, and countless Darfurians would perish in the intervening period. In the immediate term, a multinational force of first responders must stop the genocide and facilitate an urgent humanitarian effort until the UN can take over.

Regardless of the nature of the current leadership in Washington, the United States has clear obligations and unique capabilities to take the lead. The United States is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the most powerful country in the world, and it can impel

international action on this crisis. It is among the 135 signatories to the Genocide Convention, which binds it to prevent and punish that crime. It has an incomparable military capacity to transfer troops and supplies and to provide logistical support. Its unique satellite intelligence strengths allow it to track the activities of both Sudanese government forces and militias in Darfur as well as the movements of the displaced. The United States also has nearly 2,000 troops located just hours from Darfur in Djibouti, several hundred of which could be quickly mobilized into action.

The UN Security Council will not act without U.S. leadership. The Security Council continues to hesitate on Darfur, largely because of the economic and diplomatic interests of its permanent members, who don't wish to antagonize Khartoum. But unless a member of the Security Council insists that this is genocide and demands that the council address the matter, the African Union and Sudan's African neighbors will be left to bear the brunt of this growing humanitarian catastrophe without adequate resources to stop it. And they will likely be blamed for failing to act sufficiently and in time to save hundreds of thousands of lives. U.S. citizens and U.S.-based advocacy groups have the responsibility to focus on Washington's role in responding to this crisis.

If the United States leads, many African and European nations are likely to join in. Several nearby African states—including Ethiopia, Uganda, and Rwanda—are parties to the Genocide Convention. Other key African nations, such as South Africa and Nigeria, are likely to contribute to an intervention force. Britain has declared its preparedness to send troops also. Under U.S. leadership, a multinational mission could quickly put boots on the ground to stop the genocide in Darfur. In this context, concerns over the cultural insensitivity of the U.S. military would be mitigated.



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It is true that the U.S. role in Iraq undermines Washington's international standing and complicates its leadership abilities elsewhere. The Khartoum government has been quick to manipulate this fact, claiming the United States wants to invade another Arab state for its own imperialistic reasons. It is also true that the history of U.S. intervention in the world has largely been negative, and nowhere is this more evident than on the African continent, so destabilized by Cold War geopolitics. And although Darfur may not be an area of immediate strategic interest, Sudan has considerable oil wealth that U.S. companies are eager to pursue.

These realities may appear to weaken the argument for a U.S.-led intervention in Darfur. But it would be a cruel irony if the people of Darfur were to become the ultimate victims of the U.S. war in Iraq and previous United States misadventures. In legal and moral terms, an intervention to stop a genocide has a unique justification, and it offers an opportunity for Washington both to seek a multilateral solution to an international crisis and to uphold international law rather than trampling on it. This is a moment when the United States can use its political and military might for good, to save millions of lives.

This may sound idealistic, and this argument does not seek to discount the political climate in the United States

and the reluctance of the current administration to get involved in such an effort. Mindful of this inertia, it is the responsibility of progressive Americans to ensure that the United States respects and upholds international law. Justice advocates should consider this issue as if they were in power and ask how to use America's might and resources to good effect. Activists must seek to flavor public discourse to promote collaborative responses to political, man-made, and humanitarian crises. And genocide should be at the top of that list of crises.

Ten years after the genocide in Rwanda, we cannot afford to repeat the same mistakes. If we don't act now, when will we ever act? If we don't have special and clear-cut obligations in the case of genocide, when do we? Our first responsibility is to the people of Darfur, who are now dying at a rate of 1,000 people every day as the genocide continues. Our immediate emphasis must be on stopping this violence. The United States has a unique capacity to quickly mobilize a multinational effort to end the genocide in Darfur. We must demand no less.

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*(Salih Booker is executive director of Africa Action, the oldest Africa advocacy organization in the United States (online at [www.africaaction.org](http://www.africaaction.org)). He is also a board member of both the Interhemispheric Resource Center and Foreign Policy In Focus.)*

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