

U.S. Faces Moment of Truth on Darfur

By Ann-Louise Colgan | January 23, 2006

The Bush Administration will face a unique opportunity in February to end the genocide in Darfur when the United States takes over the presidency of the United Nations (UN) Security Council.

With this responsibility comes a chance to take an action that can save hundreds of thousands of lives and restore security to western Sudan. As the situation in Darfur continues to deteriorate, the U.S. leadership at the UN next month can achieve protection for the people of Darfur and affirm a commitment to stopping this first genocide of the 21st century.

The need for international intervention in Darfur is clear. More than 400,000 people have been killed and 2.5 million have been forced out of their homes since the government-sponsored genocide began in 2003. In recent months, there has been a spike in violence, and humanitarian organizations face increasing risks to their operations. There is a growing consensus around the need for a robust international protection force in Darfur to stop the violence, provide security to humanitarian efforts, facilitate peace talks and support the voluntary return of displaced people to their land.

The African Union (AU) observer mission in Darfur has done important work, but has struggled to reach its current strength of 7,000 troops. It lacks the numbers, the mandate and the logistical resources to stop the genocide and protect the people of Darfur. Both for the sake of millions of vulnerable people in Darfur and for the sake of the AU's institutional credibility, international support is needed now to ensure the success of this mission.

Responding to genocide and other crimes against humanity is a responsibility of the entire interna-

tional community. It is important that the UN act now in Darfur, as it has worked with African regional bodies in the past to reinforce their efforts in peacekeeping operations where the lives of innocent civilians are at stake.

There are two steps to achieving an immediate international intervention in Darfur and the U.S. will be uniquely positioned to seek UN action on these steps next month:

First, the UN must build on the force that is already there. The African Union mission in Darfur must be "re-hatted" with blue helmets as a UN operation, with a strong mandate from the international community to protect civilians. Since the AU troops are already in Darfur, this authorization from the UN would take effect immediately, retaining the AU troops' valuable experience on the ground and saving time pending the deployment of a larger international force. In addition, putting UN blue helmets on the AU would provide them with international authority and backing, which could offer an important boost to the troops themselves and help increase the confidence of civilians in Darfur in their operation.

Second, the international community must reinforce the African Union mission with a larger force. The total force needed in Darfur is at least 20,000 troops, based either on the ratio of peacekeeping troops to population or on the ratio of peacekeeping troops to hostile forces.



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An international intervention force must be deployed to Darfur immediately to build upon the AU and provide protection to the people of Darfur. The deployment of a UN intervention force must follow swiftly upon the "re-hatting" of the African Union, and may ultimately supplant the AU mission in Darfur.

These two steps are clear-cut, and they can work. Previous examples of successful cooperation between African regional bodies as "first responders" and the UN as reinforcement include operations in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Burundi. These precedents show that, with proper planning and coordination, a UN intervention in support of an African mission can act as a deterrent to violence and as a catalyst for successful peace talks.

The United States must provide leadership within the UN to ensure these steps are taken now. The U.S. is the only government to have publicly acknowledged that genocide is taking place in Darfur. This provides it with a unique obligation to obtain international action on this crisis. The U.S. has authored previous UN resolutions on Darfur, has provided financial support for humani-

tarian efforts, and offered diplomatic support for peace talks. But these limited actions cannot substitute for assertive international leadership to provide actual protection to the people of Darfur.

The Bush administration faces growing public and Congressional pressure for action to stop the genocide in Darfur. Next month as President of the Security Council, the administration will have a unique opportunity to achieve a UN resolution to "re-hat" the AU mission and to authorize a broader UN intervention force in Darfur. These two steps are critical to the success of the African Union in Darfur, and they are essential to save the lives of millions of vulnerable people, who urgently need international protection.

February is the make or break month for U.S. action to stop this crime against humanity.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Ann-Louise Colgan, "U.S. Faces Moment of Truth on Darfur," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, January 23, 2006).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/fpifxt/3084>

Production Information:

Writer: Ann-Louise Colgan

Editors: Emily Schwartz Greco, IPS and Emira Woods, IPS

Layout: Erik Leaver, IPS

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