

The West sits back as another Rwanda takes shape in Africa

Tony Blair has launched a commission for Africa to examine ways of resolving the continent's problems. Yet his Government has remained remarkably reluctant to criticise Sudan's Islamist government for gross oppression in Darfur.

While the commission has trumpeted the Prime Minister's pronouncement that inaction over mass slaughter in Africa is no longer acceptable, Sudan government forces and their allies have continued to bomb and burn their way across the western region with impunity.

The tragedy unfolding there is of Khartoum's political design. It is at the centre of what the Blair commission is supposed to be addressing. Government troops and their allied Janjaweed Arab militia are running an ethnic cleansing strategy. They have forced a million civilians from their homes by bombing, burning and mass rape, then corralled them into what aid workers correctly call concentration camps.

The former governor of Darfur, Dr El-Tigani Seisi, speaks of a triangle in the region condoned off from international aid by Sudan government troops and the Janjaweed militia. The camps are desperately short of food and rife with disease; more than a third of million lives are at risk without prompt action from outside.

Mukesh Kapila, until recently UN humanitarian co-ordinator in Sudan and a former official with Britain's Department for International Development, said last month that the only difference between Rwanda, scene of ethnic slaughter by Hutus in 1994, and Darfur was the number of casualties. He added that this was not simply a war but an "organised attempt to do away" with ethnically defined groups of people. The government-backed Janjaweed

militia are of Arab descent; their victims are of African descent. Both victims and aggressors are Muslims.

Although the Sudan government's actions in Darfur have been condemned in numerous UN and independent human rights reports, British officials have studiously refrained from criticising Khartoum or publicly pressuring it over its blocking of humanitarian aid to war victims in Darfur.

The British diplomatic rationale is that public criticism or threats against the Khartoum regime jeopardise the bigger goal of a north-south peace agreement between Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which was signed in Kenya last Wednesday. Others argue that pressure should be kept up on Khartoum, both to implement its deal with the south and to end its war in Darfur.

The truth is that the tortuous north-south peace negotiations have given the Sudanese government enough respite from the SPLA rebels in the south to redirect its military force on to Darfur. Khartoum is using the same scorched-earth tactics on the people of the region, whom it accuses of supporting two rebel groups there, the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), that it used on civilians in the south and the Nuba mountains.

Keeping Darfur out of the wider negotiations has been a catastrophic mistake. Railing against oppression and marginalisation by the government, SLA and JEM fighters attacked some official installations last year. Khartoum then launched its scorched-earth campaign. Government troops and the Janjaweed have literally burnt down the rebels

support base. In so doing, they have created the worst humanitarian crisis in the world - not as a by-product of war, but as deliberate military strategy.

The latest report from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Bertrand Ramcharan, accuses the Sudan government of running a reign of terror in Darfur and calls for an international commission of inquiry into human rights abuses there. Sudan government troops and their allies are reckoned to have killed some 30,000 civilians in Darfur. More than 120,000 Darfurians have fled into neighbouring Chad, where they are attacked again by Sudanese troops in cross-border raids, worsening regional security problems.

So bad are the conditions in Darfur that the normally cautious UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, said: "The international community must be prepared to take action... by action I mean a continuum of steps that may include military action". He was speaking last month on the 10th anniversary of the start of the Rwandan genocide, which claimed 800,000 lives.

Since then, two ceasefires have been signed between Khartoum and the Darfur rebels, but fighting continues. Last month, Roger Winter, assistant administrator of USAid, told the US Congress that more than 100,000 people would die, no matter what. As evidence mounts of worsening terror in Darfur, the UN Security Council has discussed the crisis twice this month, to little effect. James Cunningham, US deputy ambassador to the UN, said it would watch the response of the government and other militia groups before deciding on further action.

The Security Council has declined to

condemn the Khartoum government, let alone begin planning for an international humanitarian intervention.

Tougher words and deeds are needed. Britain and its European allies, which are well represented on the Security Council, should sponsor a resolution calling for an end to the killing, access for relief aid and a plan to allow the more than a million displaced Darfurians to return home. That should be backed by a willingness to use military means to protect aid convoys and returnees, and to enforce a serious ceasefire and disarmament agreement. The chairman of the European Union's military committee, General Gustav Hagglund, has said the union would be willing in principle to send an intervention force to Sudan, if sanctioned by the UN, following successful missions last year in Macedonia and the Congo.

The Security Council should also set up a panel to investigate alleged crimes against humanity in Darfur, and pass on cases to the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

The UN will have to work in tandem with the African Union's regional operation, which urgently needs support. It has taken the cash-strapped Africans a month to prepare a reconnaissance mission to Darfur's war zone. To be effective, the mission needs more monitors - present plans are for only 25 in a territory of more than 200,000 square miles - together with high-tech communications and recording equipment, and serious military protection. Governments have moved too slowly to stop ethnic cleansing in Darfur, but by acting now, they could still stop hundreds of thousands dying from starvation and disease.

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Khartoum talks peace, but means domination

In a continent racked by civil war, Sudan stands out. Since independence in 1956, Africa's largest country has suffered from two prolonged bouts of fighting. The first ended in 1972 with the promise of autonomy for the south, whose peoples are mainly Christian and followers of traditional African faiths. The second began in 1983, after the government in the largely Muslim north had tried to impose sharia law on the whole country. It is not surprising, therefore, that the peace deal signed in Kenya last week by the Khartoum government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLA) should have been greeted with a sigh of relief. It seems to herald the end of Africa's longest conflict, which in the past 21 years is estimated to have caused the deaths of some two million people, many of them from famine and disease, and displaced a further four million.

Sadly, there are serious doubts as to whether the new agreement will hold. They centre on the autocratic nature of the two partners, John Garang, the SPLA leader in the south, and the National Congress government in the north. Mr Garang's cause, the liberation of an oppressed minority, enjoys general support in the south, but his modus operandi has gained him enemies both within his own Dinka tribe and among the Nuer and others. He may well have difficulty in selling Wednesday's agreement on power-sharing and the status of three disputed areas to the people he claims to represent.

The same applies in spades to the Islamist Khartoum government, whose origins lie in the military ousting of a democratically elected government in 1989 and whose practice since has been ruthlessly to bar other parties from office. That sense of alienation can be seen most clearly in the western region of Darfur, as Patrick Smith demonstrates on the facing page. But it is also apparent among the armed Beja rebels in the east, and among political parties competing peacefully with the National Congress for power. President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir heads an exclusive, ideologically driven government determined not only to dominate Sudan, but also to export its extreme brand of Islam to other parts of Africa. The peace deal provides for six years of National Congress/SPLA rule, after which the south will decide by referendum whether to secede. However, it is difficult to imagine Khartoum, whose armed forces are among the biggest in Africa, agreeing to forgo much of its revenue from oil if the southern option is independence.

The four sets of agreements between Khartoum and the SPLA – an earlier one this year covered a national army and the sharing of oil revenues – are due to foreign, especially American, pressure rather than trust between the negotiating partners. That pressure will have to be maintained if the deals are to stand a chance of implementation. At the same time, outside powers must not allow the diplomatic breakthrough in Kenya to excuse in Darfur what the United Nations has called the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world. President al-Bashir's government talks peace, but by its actions continues to demonstrate its rabid intolerance of Sudan's wide ethnic, religious and political diversity.

World news

British-US rift on how to deal with Sudan 'cleansing'

By ADRIAN BLOMFELD
IN NAIROBI

BRITAIN has said it will not support calls for military intervention in Sudan despite warnings that a government campaign of ethnic cleansing against black Muslims in Darfur could cause 350,000 deaths in the next few months.

Alan Gouly, Tony Blair's special envoy to Sudan, said he also opposed sanctions against Khartoum.

The comments are likely to widen a foreign policy rift between Britain and America, the two most important western players in Sudan.

United States officials are convinced that sanctions are the only way of exerting meaningful pressure on Khartoum to avert a catastrophe that is already being compared with the genocide in Rwanda 10 years ago.

But Mr Gouly does not agree. "In the long term, threats of sanctions don't seem likely to produce immediate action and immediate action is what we need," he said.

"The more time we spend dithering, the more people

will die." The West has tried to ignore Darfur's war, described by the United Nations as the world's worst humanitarian crisis, since it began a year ago.

It is now too late to stop the ethnic cleansing. Darfur, an area the size of France, is largely empty. Arab militiamen on horses and camels, armed and funded by kinsmen in Khartoum, have ridden across Darfur, burning villages, raping women and executing men of fighting age.

About 30,000 people have been killed. More than a million black Muslim civilians accused by Khartoum of supporting rebels fighting its political and economic marginalisation of Darfur have fled.

Most of them languish in camps in Darfur's desert and Khartoum has done its best to ensure aid organisations cannot get there to feed them.

With seasonal rains expected any day, their plight can only worsen.

The only roads in Darfur and neighbouring Chad, to where at least 200,000 refugees have fled, cross dry river beds which fill up with water

when the rain begins. Aid convoys will not be able to reach the overcrowded camps, where festering disease will be worsened by the rain, for at least two months.

Last week, the International Crisis Group, a respected think tank, called on the UN Security Council to consider authorising the use of force to disarm the militias as the only way to ensure the delivery of emergency food and medicine.

Mr Gouly insists that military intervention would be a drastic and ineffective response to the crisis.

"It would be very expensive, fraught with difficulties and hard to set up in a hurry," he said.

Britain has long preferred a policy of "quiet diplomacy" with Khartoum.

British diplomats say their patience, as much as American bullying, led to a peace deal signed last week that could end a separate war, waged intermittently for half a century, between the government and non-Muslim rebels in the south.

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