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'A horror movie and a snuff movie'

November 23, 2008 | By Andy Segal CNN Senior Producer

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Mukesh Kapila said atrocities in Darfur could have been prevented if the world had taken action sooner.

"I'm angry at having presided over the first genocide of the 21st century," said Mukesh Kapila, a British doctor and former U.N. official.

He was referring to what he considers the world's ineffective response to mass atrocities in Darfur, Sudan's western region.

"What happened in Darfur would be classified as obscene," he told CNN's Christiane Amanpour. "It's a combination of a horror movie and a snuff movie."

Kapila was the United Nations' top official in Sudan.

He took up his post as resident and humanitarian coordinator in 2003, just a few months after rebels from Darfur's African tribes attacked outposts of Sudan's government, which is led by Arabs.

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The government's retaliation was so harsh that a U.N. human rights monitor issued a prophetic warning. His March 2003 report said that in the "escalating conflict," Sudan's government may be "engaged in ... ethnic cleansing aimed at eliminating African tribes from Darfur."

Unfortunately, Kapila says, the report "disappeared into a big hole" because the world's attention was on Iraq, where a U.S.-led coalition had gone to war to topple Saddam Hussein's regime.

Since 2003, according to U.N. estimates, 300,000 Darfuris have been killed in the violence or died in the ensuing disease and starvation. Another 2.5 million have been uprooted from their homes.

Kapila says it didn't have to be, and the man who was his boss at the time agrees.

"The most bitter lesson of Darfur," said Jan Egeland, former U.N. under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, "is that the world let a small conflict slowly but surely degenerate into a full-blown catastrophe."

As reports of atrocities mounted in late 2003 and into 2004, Kapila and Egeland saw a pattern: Sudanese forces and government-armed Arab militia members known as janjaweed ("devils on horseback") were using scorched-earth tactics against civilians from Darfur's African tribes. They burned villages, poisoned wells and raped women and girls, according to reports from U.N. workers and aid groups.

Sudan claims that its forces were only putting down an armed insurrection.

"I think the problems which have been happening in Darfur are problems which can be happening in any place of the world where there is a war," Sudanese Interior Minister Ibrahim Hamid said. "There are crimes, but it's not like what has been reflected in the international media."

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