

Remembering Darfur: The World's Longest Running Genocide

Written by Mukesh Kapila

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/01/27/remembering-darfur-the-worlds-longest-running-genocide/>

MUKESH KAPILA, JAN 27 2016

On the 27th of February 1945 Auschwitz concentration camp was liberated. That is why today is designated Holocaust Remembrance Day by the United Nations to recall the Nazi-perpetrated genocide that killed some 6 million Jews, 1 million Roma, 250,000 mentally and physically disabled people, and 9,000 homosexual men. We also remember today the victims of subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia. How efficient to get through all our remembering in one day! But remembering still does not mean learning and preventing, and to the list we can also add Darfur. Why did we fail there?

Soon after I took up my position as the head of the United Nations in Sudan in April 2003, the Darfur conflict erupted. Over subsequent weeks, the violence progressed rapidly even as we monitored closely the mass rapes and ethnically targeted burning of villages by Sudan government forces and militia, and communicated quickly to UN headquarters in New York, pleading for political help.

I was told by my superiors to shut up and work harder to get humanitarian aid into Darfur, although such assistance was a magnet for the mass killers and put the beneficiaries at huge risk. The UN leadership refused to allow the Security Council to be briefed even as deaths escalated as did the numbers of internally displaced and refugees fleeing to neighbouring Chad and Central African Republic. Darfur was becoming a regional peace and security problem, and also threatening the north-south peace talks to end Africa's longest running internal conflict within the then united Sudan.

My repeated personal diplomatic efforts in the major capitals of the countries that sit on the Security Council and at UN headquarters availed nothing. I was also not supported by the major UN agencies because they feared that taking a position alongside me would be to the detriment of their agencies' interests with the Sudan Government.

Having failed totally through the usual official channels, I had no choice but to go public in March 2004 by "whistleblowing" the situation through the global media via a BBC interview in which I likened Darfur to Rwanda (where I had myself witnessed the genocide exactly 10 years previously in 1994). I accused the Sudan Government of crimes against humanity and for creating the world's worst humanitarian crisis (at that time).

The impact of going to the media was immediate. A UNSC Presidential statement, Chapter VII resolution and peacekeeping troops arrived in record time. But alas too little, too late. The first genocide of the 21st century was already more or less complete. Never before have we got to know and put together the evidence so quickly, and communicated to the world leaders so fast – and yet failed so abysmally. After all, unlike the Holocaust, Cambodia or Rwanda, Darfur happened in the age of the internet, satellite imagery, and smart phone photography. We used all these tools but we failed because duty bearers at the top – charged with the responsibility to prevent and protect – did not want to act.

Beyond this bare description of *what* happened and *who* did it, can we say more on *how* it happened? The Sudanese are an ancient, cultured, generous, and tolerant people; how could the greatest of all crimes be committed in their name?

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The answer is that it was shockingly easy. Genocide is a hugely systematic effort and only authorities do this because only they have the means to organise on the scale necessary to achieve such extreme ends. Sudanese leaders did this by manipulating ordinary good but gullible people to become mass killers through a three-stage process:

First came dehumanisation. The designers orchestrated a campaign of systemically insulting the culture and way of life of the black Darfuri groups to reduce them to a sub-human status, for example, by calling them 'zurka' and 'abeed' – dirty black slaves.

Second, came distancing. The further away you are from your victims, the more efficient you are at brutalising them. Thus, sub-contracting the conduct of mass atrocities to an auxiliary militia – the 'janjaweed' – and setting up a specific genocide-minded system – allowed the ordinary organs of the state and many ordinary individuals working within them – both civilians and soldiers – to play their own roles in the process of killing the Darfuris.

Third, came desensitisation. To kill one person is shocking; to kill tens of thousands is just a statistic! Once the process of mass murder, rape, and displacement started in Darfur, its internal logic compelled it to continue so as to come as close to completion as possible with the means available to the perpetrators.

Thus, twelve years later, the perpetrators are still committing mass atrocities in Darfur with daily killings, rapes, terrorisation, and displacement. Currently some four million people are incarcerated in concentration-camp like conditions inside Darfur and in refugee camps in Chad, or scattered in other neighbouring countries and around the world. That is why, Darfur may also be described as the world's longest running genocide.

The obvious question is: why did all those caring people at the top of the UN and other good world leaders not stop the Darfur genocide having said 'never again' after Rwanda. The answer has been said elsewhere: 'for evil to flourish it is only necessary for good men to do nothing'. I personally encountered eight different excuses for inaction.

The first was *cynicism*: "What do you expect in Sudan – it is a nasty place where people have been doing nasty things to each other for so long. What is different here?"

The second was *denial*: "Surely, the situation is not as bad as you make it out to be. You are exaggerating, to gain attention."

The third was *prevarication*: "You have to be patient. It takes time. In any case, it is best if they find their own solutions to their own problems."

The fourth was *caution*: "You know that these are complicated, difficult matters. Sudan is not a small country. If we intervene, it will only make matters worse. Let us think carefully first."

The fifth was *distraction*. "You know that we have other things to do, too. Let's solve the more important/pressing issues first and then we will think about this one."

The sixth was *buck – passing*: "Why does it have to be us, all the time? Other countries/groups need to do their bit. Let someone else take this on, and then we will join in".

The seventh was *evasion of responsibility*: "We have brought this to the President/Prime Minister/Pope/Secretary General/Commission/Council...etc. So, it is being discussed at a very high level. Let us see what they decide."

Finally, *helplessness*: "You know, we can't really act because we have to get a proper framework for intervention. Discussions will take place and then we'll do something."

At the end of my futile quest, I realized that institutional decisions are actually made by individuals, and that apparently decent and caring individuals are also cowardly, hiding their feeble judgments behind the safety of their

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anonymous institutions whose policies they shape. Perhaps, they find it difficult to be stirred, because it does not hurt them enough personally. Thus, it is not so remarkable that despite all the protestations of 'never again', we failed to prevent the Darfur genocide while, bizarrely, carefully and comprehensively recording the act of failing, even as we were living through it as a sort of evil nightmare.

It is noteworthy that no high responsible officials in countries or international entities lost their jobs or even received censure for the failure to prevent the genocide in Darfur. It appears that in parallel to the impunity of perpetrators, there is equal impunity enjoyed by exalted duty-bearers who fail to act. Ultimately, this lack of personal responsibility is why we failed on Darfur, and the continuing lack of accountability is why we are likely to fail again elsewhere. The hallmark of those who failed us is cowardice.

Indeed, more than a decade later, Darfur's agony continues and, furthermore, cowardice in countering impunity there has led the same perpetrators to extend their mass atrocities methods to the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile regions of the disputed borderlands of Sudan, affecting over one million people there.

In contrast, it is also individuals that decide to stand up to injustice and tyranny. These are ordinary Darfuri, Nuban, and Blue Nile people that I have met – the likes of Suliman, Kalima, Myriam and others – whose innocent and peaceful lives were turned upside down by the horror that was visited upon them. But coming clearly through the graphic descriptions of their suffering is also their dignity, resilience, and their stubbornness to live and resist. They may have been victimised but they refuse to stay as victims. And as long as they resist, the genocidal project will not ultimately succeed. Their hallmark is courage.

As we commemorate the Holocaust, and reflect on the many current situations of injustice and cruelty that confront our common humanity, each of us, in every station of life, has a choice. Will you be courageous or cowardly?

About the author:

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