

Darfur: the world's longest running genocide

Professor Mukesh Kapila
Special Representative, Aegis Trust

As we commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Darfur genocide, it is essential to reflect on what took place a decade ago. Darfur was the first genocide of the 21st century. It happened despite our vows of “never again”, made during the previous blood-soaked century that had brought us the genocides of the Holocaust, Cambodia, Rwanda and Srebrenica, to name just a few of the mass atrocities that shaped the 20th century.

The start of my own personal Darfur story goes back to the 1990s when, as a mid-ranking British government official, I witnessed the continuing aftermaths of the chemical bombardment of Halabja in northern Iraq, the decimation of the Marsh Arabs in southern Iraq, the massacre in Srebrenica in the former Yugoslavia and, at very close hand, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. I also served for a short period with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, taking me, among other places, to the setting of the earlier genocide in Cambodia. Thus, arriving in Khartoum in March 2003 to head the United Nations system in the Sudan, I was well briefed on the oft-repeated doctrine of “never again”. One year later, as I was forced to quit Sudan, I could not help reflecting on my uncomfortable position in history - as having presided over the first genocide of the 21st century after having witnessed the last genocide of the 20th.

The picture of what actually happened in Darfur in 2003-04 has been gradually pieced together and the nature of the brutality inflicted on the people there has been well documented. In summary it was a systematic and organised attempt by supremacist - racist perpetrators (the Janjaweed aided by their government allies and led by the dominating military-political elite) to “do away” with another group of people because of their black African identity. The tactics included forced displacement of the specifically targeted Darfuri communities with a “scorched earth” policy as well as extreme violence, including murder, rape, torture, and abduction on a massive scale. This earned the President of Sudan, Omar El Bashir, and several leading members of his government indictments by the International Criminal Court for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and acts of genocide.

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?

The answer is that it was shockingly easy. Although 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, clever but evil-minded leaders can easily manipulate ordinary good but gullible people to become mass killers. In Darfur, this was 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, by sub-contracting the conduct of mass atrocities to an auxiliary force – the *janjaweed* – and setting up a specific genocide-minded system – sanctioned the ordinary organs of the state and many ordinary individuals working with 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, ten years later, the perpetrators are still committing mass atrocities in Darfur with daily killings, rapes, terrorisation, and displacement. Currently some 3-4 million people are incarcerated in concentration-camp like conditions inside Darfur and in refugee camps on 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 could we not stop the Darfur genocide? **Darfur may also be described as the first genocide of the modern digital and mass media age.** This is because never before in similar circumstances, had we known so much, so quickly, and communicated our information so fast, as when the Darfur violence erupted in 2003.

Although Darfur was a remote and isolated corner of the world with very little international presence in 2003-04, the genocide was not because of a lack of awareness of what was going on, or of a failure in early warning. As the evidence for massive crimes against humanity in Darfur mounted towards the last quarter of 2003, I raised my concerns with the Sudanese Government authorities who retaliated by stepping up their campaign of intimidation of the international community and deliberate obstruction of humanitarian access.

With little - and deteriorating - co-operation from the government, I sought greater backing for meaningful action from within the UN system. Though this resulted in some statements of concern from the United Nations multilateral system, these were quickly discounted by the Sudanese authorities. This was

because the private dialogue by most visiting senior UN envoys gave mixed messages. A fragmented approach, and personal competition and rivalries between certain UN envoys did not help - especially in a climate where some may have had their own future career prospects in mind. This was paralleled by certain UN in-country aid agencies that were reluctant to take an energetic approach to assistance and protection in Darfur, because of the fear that putting their heads above the parapet would compromise their personal and institutional position with the authorities.

The UN mandate in Sudan in 2003-04 was largely limited to humanitarian work, along with some development support and, latterly, planning for the recovery and reconstruction that was expected to ensue after the signature of the North-South Peace Agreement. When I asked for UN political guidance on Darfur, I was told to improve our humanitarian assistance and coordination efforts. Senior levels of the political wing of the UN Secretariat refused to give serious consideration to a political approach, remitting the problem instead to the humanitarian wing of the Secretariat. The lessons of the UN-commissioned enquiries into its own very serious internal failings in Srebrenica and Rwanda were forgotten. This was especially the case with respect to personal responsibilities to act in situations where grave crimes against humanity are being perpetrated or suspected.

Having achieved very little within the UN system in terms of seeking a political engagement, I turned to powerful member states for help. I made representations to their embassies in Khartoum and directly at capitals through visits in Europe and North America. I learnt that western members of the Security Council had very good sources of information and were well aware of what was going on but my urgent requests for the Security Council to engage formally was refused, due to the reluctance of the UN secretariat's own top leadership at that time, as well as downright denial by several of the most powerful member states.

It seemed extraordinary to us that the world's greatest humanitarian and human rights catastrophe taking place in the context of Africa's longest running war in the continent's largest country and which had generated the world's largest population of displaced people – had not merited any Security Council attention since anyone could remember. Security Council members were reluctant to act, including some because of their own strategic interests for resources or influence in Sudan. Thus, while Darfur burnt, we were left to fiddle with tokenistic attempts at humanitarian aid for the few victims to whom we could gain access through the government's layers of obstruction.

So, we were well set for failure: Darfur was doomed and genocide could not be prevented, yet again. There were many similarities to Rwanda. In both places, a decade apart, similar factors were at play: a UN management that gave mixed messages and could not be bothered enough, a Security Council that was deaf, key member states with other interests to pursue, and flawed assumptions and analysis that fed prevarication and inaction.

In Darfur, my involvement was close enough to assert with conviction that earlier intervention could have averted or moderated the magnitude of the genocide. That is to say that though serious crimes against humanity would probably still have been committed, we could have reduced the killings. That alone would have been worth the effort. Furthermore, by acting more decisively at that time when the perpetrators were less entrenched and had a stake in not going too far, or were more open to influence, we may have had more effective and less expensive options for peace-making, peace-keeping, and peace-building than have turned out to be the case.

These arguments are not the wisdom of hindsight as the logic was evident to anyone who wished to read the writing on the wall. They were made at the time to all who would listen. But, as has been said so often elsewhere: *‘for evil to flourish it is only necessary for good men to do nothing’*. Why did apparently good people in the international community do nothing? There were eight different excuses that were put to me.

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

The third reaction 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 excuse 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 alibi 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 riposte 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 reason 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 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 also 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 those international 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 is cowardice.**

Indeed, 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. This moving book by Antonella Napoli brings to vivid life the testimony of ordinary Darfuri people – like Suliman, Nora, Sarima, 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.**

This then is the choice for each of us to make – courage or cowardice - as we look forward to where the outcomes of this International Conference may drive us.

Dr Mukesh Kapila was the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sudan in 2003-4. Currently he is Professor of Global Health and Humanitarian Affairs at the University of Manchester, and Special Representative of the Aegis Trust for the Prevention of Crimes against Humanity.

He is the author of *“Against A Tide Of Evil”*. Follow his work at www.mukeshkapila.org and via Twitter @mukeshkapila