

From The Washington Post

In Darfur, My Camera Was Not Nearly Enough

By Brian Steidle

Our helicopter touched down in a cloud of camel-brown sand, dust and plastic debris. As the cloud gradually settled into new layers on the bone-dry desert landscape, we could make out the faces of terrified villagers. "Welcome to Sudan," I murmured to myself, grabbing my pen and waterproof notebook.

A former Marine, I had arrived in Sudan's Darfur region in September 2004 as one of three U.S. military observers for the African Union, armed only with a pen, pad and camera. The mandate for the A.U. force allowed merely for the reporting of violations of a cease-fire that had been declared last April and the protection of observers. The observers sometimes joked morbidly that our mission was to search endlessly for the cease-fire we constantly failed to find. I soon realized that this was no joke.

The conflict had begun nearly 1 1/2 years earlier and had escalated into a full-scale government-sponsored military operation that, with the support of Arab militias known as the Janjaweed, was aimed at annihilating the African tribes in the region. And while the cease-fire was supposed to have put a stop to that, on an almost daily basis we would be called to investigate reports of attacks on civilians. We would find men, women and children tortured and killed, and villages burned to the ground.

The first photograph I took in Darfur was of a tiny child, Mihad Hamid. She was only a year old when I found her. Her mother had attempted to escape an onslaught from helicopter gunships and Janjaweed marauders that had descended upon her village of Alliet in October 2004. Carrying her daughter in a cloth wrapped around her waist, as is common in Sudan, Mihad's terrified mother had run from her attackers. But a bullet had rung out through the dry air, slicing through Mihad's flesh and puncturing her lungs. When I discovered the child, she was nestled in her mother's lap, wheezing in a valiant effort to breathe. With watery eyes, her mother lifted Mihad for me to examine.

Most Sudanese villagers assume that a khawadja -- a foreigner -- must be a doctor. And my frantic efforts to signal to her to lay her struggling daughter back down only convinced her that I had medical advice to dispense. It broke my heart to be able to offer her only a prayer and a glance of compassion, as I captured this casualty with my camera and notepad. I pledged, with the linguistic help of our team's Chadian mediator, that we would alert the aid organizations poised to respond.

"This is what they do," the mediator -- a neutral party to the conflict -- screamed at me. "This is what happens here! Now you know! Now you see!" I was unaware at that time that when the aid workers arrived the next day, amid continued fighting, they would never be able to locate Mihad.

Mihad now represents to me the countless victims of this vicious war, a war that we documented but given our restricted mandate were unable to stop. Every day we surveyed evidence of killings: men castrated and left to bleed to death, huts set on fire with people locked inside, children with their faces smashed in, men with their ears cut off and eyes plucked out, and the corpses of people who had been executed with gunshots to the head. We spoke with thousands of witnesses -- women who had been gang-raped and families that had lost fathers, people who plainly and soberly gave us their accounts of the slaughter.

Often we were the witnesses. Just two days after I had taken Mihad's photo, we returned to Alliet. While talking to a government commander on the outskirts of the town, we heard a buzz

that sounded like a high-voltage power line. Upon entering the village, we saw that the noise was coming from flies swarming over dead animals and people. We counted about 20 dead, many burned, and then flew back to our camp to write our report. But the smell of charred flesh was hard to wash away.

The conflict in Darfur is not a battle between uniformed combatants, and it knows no rules of war. Women and children bear the greatest burden. The Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps are filled with families that have lost their fathers. Every day, women are sent outside the IDP camps to seek firewood and water, despite the constant risk of rape at the hands of the Janjaweed. Should men be available to venture out of the camps, they risk castration and murder. So families decide that rape is the lesser evil. It is a crime that families even have to make such a choice. Often women are sexually assaulted within the supposed safety of the IDP camps. Nowhere is really safe. If and when the refugees are finally able to return home and rebuild, many women may have to support themselves alone; rape victims are frequently ostracized, and others face unwanted pregnancies and an even greater burden of care.

The Janjaweed militias do not act alone. I have seen clear evidence that the atrocities committed in Darfur are the direct result of the Sudanese government's military collaboration with the militias. Attacks are well coordinated by Sudanese government officials and Arab militias, who attack villages together. Before these attacks occur, the cell phone systems are shut down by the government so that villagers cannot warn each other. Whenever we lost our phone service, we would scramble to identify the impending threat. We knew that somewhere, another reign of terror was about to begin.

Helicopter gunships belonging to the government routinely support the Arab militias on the ground. The gunships fire anti-personnel rockets that contain flashettes, or small nails, each with stabilizing fins on the back so the point hits the target first. Each gunship contains four rocket pods, each rocket pod contains about 20 rockets and each rocket contains about 500 of these flashettes. Flashette wounds look like shotgun wounds. I saw one small child's back that looked as if it had been shredded by a cheese grater. We got him to a hospital, but we did not expect him to live.

On many of the occasions we tried to investigate these attacks, we would find that fuel for our helicopters was mysteriously unavailable. We would receive unconvincing explanations from the Sudanese government's fuel company -- from "we are out of fuel" to "our fuel pumps are broken." At the same time, government helicopters continued to strafe villages unimpeded.

Those villagers who were able to escape flocked to existing IDP camps, where they would scrounge for sticks and plastic bags to construct shelter from the sun and wind. In even these desperate situations, however, the Sudanese government would not give up its murderous mission. First it would announce the need to relocate an IDP camp and assess the population of displaced people, often grossly underestimating the numbers. Then after international aid organizations had built a new, smaller camp, the government would forcibly relocate the population, leaving hundreds to thousands without shelter. It would bulldoze or drive over the old camps with trucks, often in the middle of the night in order to escape notice. It would then gather up and burn the remaining debris.

The worst thing I saw came last December, when Labado, a village of 20,000 people, was burned to the ground. We rushed there after a rebel group contacted us, and we arrived while the attack was still in progress. At the edge of the village, I found a Sudanese general who explained why he was doing nothing to stop the looting and burning. He said his job was to protect civilians and keep the road open to commercial traffic and denied that his men were participating in the attack. Then a group of uniformed men drove by in a Toyota Land Cruiser. The general said they were just going to get water, but they stopped about 75 yards away, jumped out, looted a hut and burned it. The attacks continued for a week. We have no idea how many people died there but tribal leaders later said close to 100 were missing.

Since I left Darfur last month, I have tried, in press conferences, newspaper interviews and congressional testimony, to publicize conditions there in the hope that the international community will intervene more vigorously instead of watching the atrocities run their course. That way we won't look back years from now and ask why we didn't stop another genocide.

I believe this conflict can be resolved through international pressure and international support of the African Union. Weapons sanctions and a no-fly zone throughout Darfur are critical. I have seen that the mere presence of A.U. forces can discourage attacks and, with more support, they could stop the conflict.

In December, the Sudanese general at Labado had told us that his mission was to continue clearing the route all the way to Khartoum, hundreds of miles away. The next town in line was Muhajeryia, roughly twice the size of Labado. The African Union placed 35 soldiers into Muhajeryia, not to protect the village, but to protect the civilian contractors who were establishing a base camp. Yet this small force alone was able to deter the government of Sudan, with a force of a few thousand soldiers and Janjaweed militiamen, from attacking. Shortly after that, the A.U. was able to deploy 70 more soldiers from the protection force and 10 military observers to the scorched village of Labado. Within one week, approximately 3,000 people returned to rebuild. In addition, the A.U. negotiated the withdrawal of Sudanese government troops from the area.

To secure and protect all villages in Darfur, the African Union needs several things: an expanded mandate that would allow it to protect civilians and ensure secure routes for humanitarian aid, advanced logistics and communication support, and an increase in the size of the protection force by tens of thousands.

The attention paid to Darfur in Congress and at the United Nations hasn't been enough. For the first time, we might be able to stop genocide in the making. We must not fail the men, women and children of Darfur.

During my time in Darfur, as I listened to the victims, I was astounded at their composure. Their unwavering faith provides some rationale to what seems to me an inexplicable horror. By handing over their lives to God, somehow each day is a gift, despite the massacres. "We're going to die," they acknowledge with fear, "but we hope to survive . . . Inshallah [God willing]." Unfortunately, they just don't have a choice.

We do.