Questions on Darfur: A Response from the UCLA Darfur Action Committee

> *"In 1915, Woodrow Wilson turned a blind eye to the Armenian genocide. In the 1940's, Franklin Roosevelt refused to bomb the rail lines leading to Auschwitz. In 1994, Bill Clinton turned away from the slaughter in Rwanda. And in 2005, President Bush is acquiescing in the first genocide of the 21st century, in Darfur."* — Nicholas Kristof

The conflict in Darfur, Sudan has been labeled the first genocide of the 21st century, and represents the first genocide in history to be labeled for what it is while it is still occurring. As a response to the limited international attention paid to the Darfur crisis, a social movement has developed in the United States, as exemplified by the Darfur Action Committee of the University of California, Los Angeles (DAC). This editorial is a response to a set of questions posed to the DAC by the editors of *Ufahamu* in regards to the Darfur crisis and the student activism surrounding it. The questions ask the DAC to examine the risk supporting the Darfur rebels poses to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement between Northern and Southern Sudan; to address the motives behind various transnational actors supporting the Darfur rebels; and to discuss why the Darfur genocide has produced a response from social action groups in the United States while other global conflicts have not.

This editorial will address all three questions; however, important common themes connect each response. First, it is important to acknowledge that the structure and

intensity of the killings in Darfur has reached a level that calls for humanity before politics; it is important to address the complex political situation in Sudan, but our first priority must be to stop the killings. Despite one's opinions on the term "genocide" and whether one considers the Darfur crisis to amount to genocide, our elected government has on multiple occasions declared it a genocide and yet has consistently failed to take the necessary action to back up that declaration. Second, the editors of *Ufahamu* consistently refer to problems associated with supporting the Darfur rebel groups. However, a critical distinction is that although the conflict in Darfur may be between the rebels and the Khartoum government, the genocide is between the government of Sudan and the innocent civilians of Darfur. The international call for action in Darfur is not asking for global support of rebel groups; it is asking for global support to end genocide. The death toll in Darfur is over 400,000, with approximately 2.5 million displaced (Coalition for International Justice 2005). The rebel groups of Darfur do not have a membership that approaches three million.

Question One: Darfur and the North-South Agreement

In January 2005, an internationally backed comprehensive peace agreement ended a 20-year civil war between the Arab central government and the Christian/Animist people of Southern Sudan. Early in 2003, two loosely allied non-Arab rebel groups in Darfur, the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) attacked military installations of the central government. The rebel groups sought to end the region's severe economic and political marginalization, demanding inclusion in the developing power-sharing

agreement, exemplified by the passage of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Instead of directly responding against the rebel groups of Darfur, the Sudanese government systematically has responded against the entire population of Darfur. It is important to note that the Darfur genocide is now in its third year; and despite the violence in Darfur, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was still able to be passed in 2005, two years into the genocide.

There is a possibility that resolution in Darfur could play a factor in undermining the peace agreement between the North and South. However, it is the government of Sudan that truly threatens the North-South agreement, not the situation in Darfur. The violence of the North-South war and the instability of the peace agreement do not justify the genocide of an entire population. This is a government that has adopted a strategic policy of rape, consistently has blocked humanitarian access, and uses military planes to execute air raids on Darfurian villages. Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times* discusses the Sudanese response to rape in Darfur:

> Sudan has refused to allow aid groups to bring into Darfur more rape kits that include medication that reduces the risk of infection from H.I.V. The government has also imprisoned rape victims who became pregnant, for adultery. Even those who simply seek medical help are harassed and humiliated (Kristof 2005).

The international community and the government of Sudan do have a responsibility to uphold peace in Southern Sudan, but not at the expense of the people of Darfur.

The actions of the Darfur rebel groups may in fact represent a precursor to a power-grab by marginalized groups across Sudan. However, the DAC and I are not qualified to remark on the motives of rebel groups in a region assaulted by genocide. We do not specifically support an international backing of the Sudanese Liberation Army or the Justice and Equality Movement; we support an international backing for the end of genocide. Included in this support is the call for increased economic pressure on Sudan, monetary and logistical support for the African Union, and increased humanitarian aid and security to the innocent people of Darfur.

Question Two: The Motives of Respondents to Darfur

The Darfur crisis has produced a diverse international response that transcends race, religion, ethnicity and political views. The DAC has received support from student groups such as the Jewish Student Union, the United Arab Society, and both Bruin Republicans and Bruin Democrats. Darfur accountability legislation in the United States has received bipartisan support in both the House and Senate. The Darfur "coalition" that has developed speaks directly to the grotesque level of violence and to the urgency of taking action. The editors at *Ufahamu* have asked us to respond to accusations that certain supporters of Darfur, specifically Jewish and Christian groups who seek to demonize the Arab/Muslim government, are pursuing their own agendas rather then a genuine concern for peace. I would ask the accusers to find an example of an internationally acknowledged humanitarian crisis that did not feature international actors with unique motives. The North-South agreement that is of the concern of the *Ufahamu* editors in

the first question, was brought upon by the vigorous support of various Christian groups in the United States that were expressly motivated by the religious aspect of that region's conflict. These accusations apply much more to Southern Sudan than to Darfur, where both sides are Muslim and the conflict is of more an ethnic than a religious nature.

In regards to the motivations of the supporters of Darfur, it is once again critical to acknowledge that there is a distinction between supporting the rebel groups in Darfur and supporting the end to genocide in Darfur. Most of the supporters of Darfur support peace and an end to civilian-directed violence, not specifically the rebel groups in Darfur. The DAC has worked with a multitude of local, state and national actors, and not once have we been asked or approached to directly support the rebel groups. The response to the Darfur genocide represents a unique moment in which the international response truly has been for humanity before politics. Even if the various supporters of Darfur have a specific agenda against the government of Sudan, I personally do not take issue with "demonizing" a brutal government that commits genocide against its own people.

Question Three: The Response to Darfur

The third question posed to the DAC by the editors of *Ufahamu* asks us to comment on why the Darfur crisis has received so much attention while other conflicts in Africa, such as the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, have received so little. I would begin my response by asking the editors to step outside of the box of academia and ask: Has the Darfur crisis really received that much attention? While it is true that the Darfur genocide has

produced such groups as the DAC and other conflicts have not, it certainly is not because this issue is widely known or presented in the media. The following report from BeAWitness.org illustrates the lack of media attention, "During June 2005, CNN, FOXNews, NBC/MSNBC, ABC, and CBS ran 50 times as many stories about Michael Jackson and 12 times as many stories about Tom Cruise as they did about the genocide in Darfur." The genocide in Darfur rages on because awareness is still horrendously low and it is quickly becoming the first *forgotten* genocide of the 21st century.

So if it is not media attention that has produced a unique response against the genocide in Darfur, what has? One of the major reasons has been the use of the term genocide in regards to the crisis in Darfur. Once again, despite ones feelings about the word or its application to Darfur, it does carry a certain weight and has been used by the highest levels of the U.S. government. Genocide brings out an emotional response from many groups affected by past genocides: Armenians, Jews, Cambodians, etc.; and these groups make up a strong portion of the DAC and the international response to Darfur. Another reason is that Darfur is a relatively more "accessible" conflict to take action against than those in the Democratic Republic of Congo or even Northern Uganda. In Darfur, the situation involves a government committing atrocities against its own people, whereas the conflict in the other countries more involves actors outside of the government. In Darfur, it is easier to support concretely "innocent civilians" and put humanity above politics. This is not to say that the conflicts in these other African countries are less important, in fact, according to the United Nations, the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo is currently the world's worst

humanitarian crisis. These conflicts are also being ignored and desperately need the world's attention. For whatever reasons, the genocide in Darfur has begun to produce an international movement with the potential to actually stop genocide while it is still occurring rather than condemn it after the fact. It is the hope of the DAC that our actions not only will help to stop the violence in Darfur but will provide the framework and momentum needed to stop and prevent ignored conflicts throughout Africa.

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