

Save Darfur: Take Action and Save Lives

March 2, 2007

By Rabbi Stuart W. Gershon
Copyright 2007 Temple Sinai, Summit, NJ

Abstract: What is especially shameful is that the coming of March 2007 marks the beginning of the fourth year of violence, and the most powerful countries in the world -- the United States, China, and Russia -- have taken very little effective action to stop it. So, "after four years, 400,000 deaths, never-ending denials and countless false promises," the Sudanese regime continues to pursue genocide in Darfur. In the face of looming humanitarian collapse, I trust you agree with me that where we are is unacceptable, totally morally unacceptable.

At the urging of Pastor Emilie Boggis and myself, the Summit Interfaith Clergy Council has designated this weekend a special Weekend of Action and Prayer to save the people of Darfur.

So I want to especially thank you for being with us tonight. I also want to thank the Temple Sinai 5th grade religious school class for doing such a wonderful job of leading us in prayer, and for picking the perfect prayers for our theme tonight: *Shalom rav*, let there be a great peace. And how shall we accomplish it? *Yad b'yad*, hand in hand.

I think most of us are fairly knowledgeable by now about the genocide and ethnic cleansing currently taking place in Darfur. The Sudanese government and its janjaweed militia deliberately use mass murder, displacement, starvation, and rape to achieve their objective of eliminating the African, non-Arab population of Darfur. As a result, we know that 400,000 human beings have lost their lives forever.

We know that the janjaweed and Sudanese government forces operate with horrifying brutality. First the Sudanese airforce attacks Darfurian enclaves from the air. Then the janjaweed storm the villages to massacre or maim innocent men, women, and children, and to plunder whatever there is to plunder.

We know that four million people are at risk from this violence, completely dependent upon international humanitarian aid for their survival from starvation and disease, with 2.5 million of them now living in un-administered refugee camps.

The situation on the ground gets worse and worse. A new government offensive has displaced thousands more. Atrocities occur every day. There has been a terrible increase in the rapes of Darfurian women and girls. In the last six months, thirteen international aid workers have been murdered, and relief organizations warn that their operations are teetering on the brink of collapse unless security is improved.

The violence has spread to two neighboring countries, Chad and the Central African Republic. The janjaweed militia has crossed the international border into Chad to attack Darfurians taking

refuge there. One hundred thousand Chadians living near the border have also fled in an attempt to escape the violence.

Meanwhile, the operations of the already meager African Union peacekeeping force have been scaled back even further, due to funding and manpower shortages.

What is especially shameful is that the coming of March 2007 marks the beginning of the fourth year of violence, and the most powerful countries in the world – the United States, China, and Russia -- have taken very little effective action to stop it. For economic reasons, the Chinese and Russians stonewall and block political efforts to pressure the Sudanese government to end the violence.

While President Bush should be commended for being the very first to call what is happening in Darfur “genocide,” the Bush administration has not followed through with any of the sanctions at its disposal. President Bush demanded that the Sudanese authorities cooperate with international peacekeeping efforts by January 1. Now, two months past that deadline, the White House has not put any bite into its bark.

So, “after four years, 400,000 deaths, never-ending denials and countless false promises,” the Sudanese regime continues to pursue genocide in Darfur. In the face of looming humanitarian collapse, I trust you agree with me that where we are is unacceptable, totally morally unacceptable.

As we all know, the world did not stop the genocide of Armenians. The world did not stop the holocaust. Despite the vow of “never again,” the world failed to protect millions of innocent victims in Cambodia, and Bosnia, and Rwanda.

But we can stop this genocide.

We must not accept this genocide.

I was born after the holocaust. Then I could not have spoken up. I lived through the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia and said nothing. Then I should have spoken up.

How can we judge those who failed to help the victims of the holocaust, if we are not ready to take action now ourselves?

We must not accept this genocide.

We can stop this genocide.

And we, the Jewish people, are all too acquainted with genocide and ethnic cleansing. Having been the victims of both, it is imperative upon us to speak out now. Now is the time to take effective action. For only if we act will innocent lives be saved. We must put pressure on the Sudanese authorities to consent to the deployment of a 20,000 strong hybrid African Union and

UN peacekeeping force, originally agreed to by the Sudanese, and authorized by United Nations Resolution 1701.

We must put pressure on the international community and especially our own government to implement targeted sanctions including: to enforce an arms embargo on Sudan and a no-fly zone over Darfur, to ban ships carrying Sudanese oil from our ports, to impose travel bans and asset freezes on Sudanese authorities, and to support the International Criminal Court in its investigation and prosecution of Sudanese officials for war crimes. The ICC handed down its first two indictments this week.

Some of us are skeptical, no doubt, about what kind of power we possess to put pressure on world leaders. But if we are resolute, we have the power to make a difference. Let us stand up to the Sudanese government itself. The Sudanese government is aware of the save Darfur movement and does not enjoy the negative publicity. So let's keep up the heat!

You can send a letter to the Sudanese embassy to demand an end to the genocide. You can send a letter to the editor of local newspapers condemning the Sudanese government for its policies of ethnic cleansing.

Let us speak up to our own government. You can send a monthly letter demanding serious action from President Bush, from Senators Frank Lautenberg and Robert Menendez, and from Congressman Michael Ferguson.

Let us speak up to the international community. You can send letters and petitions to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and to the embassies of China and Russia.

There is going to be another global Day of Solidarity for Darfur on April 29. Save the date and get involved.

In addition, one very effective action we can take is to support the Sudan divestment movement. By divesting from investments in companies that conduct business as usual with Sudan, we deprive Sudan's leaders of the foreign investment dollars they rely upon to finance their genocide. The Sudan divestment campaign is particularly focussed on state-owned Chinese oil companies because China is Sudan's biggest oil customer, arms supplier, and ally on the UN Security Council, and two of the largest American investors in Petrochina, a major Chinese oil company that provides huge oil revenues to the Sudanese government, are Berkshire Hathaway and Fidelity.

How do we get involved with the divestment campaign? First of all, each of us can screen our own investment portfolio. Both the Sudan divestment task force (www.Sudandivestment.org) and the American Jewish World Service (www.ajws.org) offer tools to do this online. You can also write to Fidelity and to Warren Buffett of Berkshire Hathaway, strongly urging them to sell their holdings in Petrochina. After that, we can urge the companies we work for to divest. We can urge Summit city council to divest. We can urge the universities and graduate schools we attended to divest, and many are already doing so. We

must take some action, write some letter, at least once a week. We must remain steadfast and resolute in our determination to stop this genocide.

Please do not leave tonight without signing the petition to President Bush. Please call the White House message center using the sample script I have prepared for you.

How appropriate that we come together to save lives in Darfur by creating awareness and inspiring each other to action on the very same weekend when we celebrate the festival of Purim. For one of Purim's most valuable teachings is that the lives of innocent people can be saved when good people, like Mordechai and Esther, people like you and me, take effective action.

This is the first genocide of the 21st century.

We must not accept this genocide.

We can stop this genocide.