

Hope for Darfur?

By Brenton Diaz

The recent history of the country of Sudan reads like a war chronicle buried deep within the folds of the Old Testament. Tribes of different backgrounds fight bloody battles, with more than a hint of racial overtones coloring the struggle. And nowhere is this violence more palpable than in the tense and tragic western province of Darfur. Now, with the threat of more violence and even famine brought on by displacement looming, the world waits tensely as the Sudanese government endeavors to facilitate a peacekeeping process in the region.

The conflict in Darfur began three years ago when rebels attacked government installations, defending their actions by accusing the Sudanese government of favoring the Arab population while oppressing the black Africans living in the region. The government then supported armed militias called "Janjaweed" to quash the uprising. These militias are accused of committing terrible acts of ethnic cleansing against black Africans through violence, rape, torture and theft. Horror stories of the Janjaweed rolling into villages on motorcycles and horses to kill men and kidnap women as sex slaves have become commonplace. Children have been slain, and government helicopters have reportedly rained gunfire upon unarmed civilians on the ground below. Tens of thousands of people have died, while countless survivors have been displaced and harmed. The tragedy has sparked a worldwide outcry against the violence, which is being called "genocide" by numerous activist groups.

Yet, in the midst of such desperate circumstances, there is a semblance of hope, albeit a tentative one. A peace deal was recently signed by one of the rebel factions, and talks are currently taking place to have two other rebel groups sign the deal, thereby ending the violence. As international mediators pour into Sudan to help facilitate the peace process, a worldwide grassroots response is also bringing the tragedy to light and creating the conditions for an unlikely hope.

Contrasting many other instances of injustice and war, the Darfur genocide has captured the imagination of peace activists and concerned people all across the globe. For example, www.savedarfur.org/ presents itself as a multi-faith response to Darfur, offering information, updates and ways to get involved to advocate for the embattled residents of Darfur. Meanwhile, www.darfurgenocide.org is a humanitarian advocate seeking to provide opportunities for people whose hearts have been touched by the genocide to appeal to the U.S. government and to react to the violence in other ways. www.protectdarfur.org takes a more focused approach, advocating on behalf of the many victims and displaced people of the violence.

However, despite the signs of peace that are slowly becoming apparent in Darfur, Elizabeth Berton-Hunter of Amnesty International Canada cautions against being too optimistic at this point and pleads for more action to be taken to end the crisis.

"The violence is as bad as it was three years ago," she said. "There are some

peace deals in the works, but they are deteriorating.”

In fact, the situation is still so volatile in Darfur, even with the intense peace talks, that Amnesty International has put a high priority on their work on the situation. In a recent statement, Amnesty writes, “The U.N. Security Council must ensure the urgent deployment in Darfur of a strong U.N. mission authorized to use force to protect civilians,” urging that the United Nations fulfill their role as protectors of people by deploying a peacekeeping force in the region.

Berton-Hunter hopes that the deployment of such a force could stabilize the region “and provide the protection to civilians that the U.N. is committed to.”

However, beyond the United Nations level response to Darfur, Berton-Hunter has some timely suggestions for concerned people wanting to make a difference. When asked what concerned young people can do end the violence in Darfur, Berton-Hunter responds simply, “the biggest thing a citizen can do is write letters ... to the government, to the United Nations, to other organizations. Citizens can also support the U.N. in their possible deployment of a presence in Darfur.”

With the advocate sites listed above, offering concerned people government addresses to write to and access to petitions to sign electronically, advocating for the people of Darfur is not complicated. With such a system in place, Berton-Hunter passionately pleads with people to take advantage of these opportunities to advocate for Darfur and not to sit idly by waiting for others to act. Berton-Hunter quietly but firmly cautions, “It’s going to take a lot of work to make Darfur a different place,” highlighting again the need for the grassroots response to Darfur to continue to emerge. That so many have already responded to the call to help the people of Darfur is encouraging, but more work is needed to create the conditions for peace in this region.

As Christians with the understanding of the Lord’s sovereignty even over issues as seemingly chaotic as Darfur’s, we can act even further to initiate peace in this region. We can pray for the people of Darfur, and support in prayer, finances and in encouragement Christian agencies and institutions like Pan Africa Christian College in Nairobi, which is investigating the possibility of opening a Christian university campus in the Sudan, in their work on the behalf of the people of this war-torn country. We can understand and realize that even in a situation as “hopeless” and tragic as Darfur, the Lord can still use Christians who are willing to make their voice heard for peace. By doing so, we will not only see peace in places like Darfur, but we can also see the following verse acted out in our own lives: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9).