

World must not turn away from Darfur's desperation

By Mia Farrow

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Fatima was just minutes old and already the flies had found her. She and her young mother lay on a cot in a small bare room without a window or door. The floor was unpaved but swept clean. It is one of two rooms in this tiny clinic where there is no operating room, few instruments and no medicine. "They would be stolen," explained the doctor.

Fatima entered this world on June 12 in Zam Zam refugee camp in Sudan's North Darfur region, where there is one doctor for 40,000 people.

Since 2003, almost 90 percent of the villages of Darfur have been bombed and burned by the Sudanese government and its proxy Arab militia, the janjaweed. Up to 450,000 people have been killed. Terrified survivors of unimaginable atrocities walk across the parched terrain in search of safety, food and water. Today, 2 million human beings live amid deplorable conditions in swollen refugee camps across Darfur. Overwhelmingly, they are women and children. A majority of men and boys have been killed. Those who survive have taken up arms with rebel groups.

The refugees shelter under plastic sheets supplied by aid workers. Food rations have been cut to less than what is required to sustain human life. Clean water is insufficient. Meanwhile, a cholera outbreak is spreading, with the potential to claim tens of thousands of lives. Worst of all, there is no safety: The janjaweed are always nearby, and the camps are attacked relentlessly.

Women and girls are raped and children abducted. The women's stories are shockingly similar. In quiet voices they speak of their losses--of beloved sons, husbands, brothers and fathers tortured, mutilated, murdered. They recount their rapes and show the brands carved into their skin. They reveal tendons sliced and how they hobble now.

Halima, whose baby was pulled from her back, told me how she fought, how she did her utmost to hold on to her child. But he was torn out of her arms and killed before her eyes with a bayonet. Three of her five children were slaughtered that day, and her husband too. "Janjaweed," she said, "they cut them and threw them into the well." Halima clasped my two hands, pleading: "Tell people what is happening here. Tell them we need help."

The much-heralded May 5 "Darfur peace agreement" had only accelerated the violence by mid-June when I reached Darfur. Just one of the three rebel factions, the one with the least popular support, signed the agreement. This, with its issues of compensation and representation, has triggered angry splits within the groups. From the mountains of Jebel Marra to the plains of Galap, the pitch was feverish in opposing rebel-held territories, especially among the heavily armed group against the signing. The situation cannot possibly hold. With insecurity escalating, aid workers struggling to keep almost 4 million people alive are themselves in danger. Last week, another four humanitarian workers were killed. If the aid agencies withdraw, the only infrastructure in place to sustain the millions of displaced people will collapse. People could begin to die by the hundreds of thousands. This could happen any moment.

The international community was relieved when in 2004 the African Union, with a force now numbering 7,000, entered Darfur to monitor what has been a non-existent cease-fire. "African solutions to African problems" became the mantra of the international community, but the world failed to support the AU in essential ways and so inevitably, the AU has failed in Darfur. Near bankruptcy, the union has withdrawn from four camps and ceased many protection patrols. More significant, they are lacking competent troops to do the job.

"We need to hand over the baton to the UN," AU Chairman Alpha Oumar Konar said last month.

And that's the truth. Only a robust UN peacekeeping force can save Darfur.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's attempts to gain consent for such a mission from the government of Sudan, the perpetrators of this genocide, have been predictably refused. Appallingly, the UN and the world community have simply acquiesced, seemingly content to let genocide take its course.

For Halima, and all the courageous women of Darfur in this, their hour of terror and suffering, I am doing my best to "tell people what is happening" there. And for newborn Fatima, I can only hope with all my heart that if good people know what she is facing, they will respond.

Mia Farrow is an actor and UNICEF goodwill ambassador. She just returned from her second trip to the Darfur region of Sudan.

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