Waiting in Darfur: Tragedy in slow motion

by Paul Jeffrey in the October 2, 2007 issue

The valley that stretches north from the Bela Mountains turns deep green every year when the rains come to West Darfur. Any farmer would love the wide, well-watered valley, and indeed you can see faint outlines of fields where donkey-drawn plows once turned the soil over seeds of sorghum and peanuts. But there are no farmers and no donkeys today, just an occasional herd of camels and a herder or two lingering in the shadows of the trees along the wadi that absorbs the afternoon thunderstorms. And there are no farmers' homes, but only the decaying circles of mud that were once the walls of huts whose thatched roofs sheltered the laughing children of the Fur tribe.

The village, called Bela like the mountains, has been quiet since a December 2003 attack by Arab militias that killed 37 people and drove the terrorized survivors into camps for the internally displaced outside the nearby cities of Garsila and Deleij. Its silence is the sound of genocide in slow motion, and the grass and weeds growing up amidst the skeletons of burned huts is proof that the world hasn't really cared enough to stop the violence and bring the people of Bela home.

Bela's residents were African farmers, and they have a lot in common with the Arab nomads who drove them away. Both groups are dark-skinned, both are Muslim and speak Arabic. But their cultural differences—between farmer and herder (as between Cain and Abel)—fill centuries of Darfur history with tension and were exploited by the Arab government in Khartoum. It felt threatened by a nascent rebel movement that began to demand a better deal for the long-marginalized communities here in this Texas-sized region of Sudan. The government pushed the nomads to fight the farmers by providing arms, money and intelligence, as well as Antonov bombers to accompany the raids. As a result, as many as 400,000 people are dead and more than 2.2 million displaced. More than 4 million Darfuris are directly affected by the violence, and hundreds of villages like Bela lie abandoned, their charred ruins slowly being reclaimed by the elements.

Life in the camps, at least the ones that the United Nations and a handful of international aid agencies can get to (access is a growing problem with the rise of attacks on humanitarian workers), is far from comfortable. For many of the displaced, however, some aspects of life are better than before. Children, especially girls, have access to schools they didn't always have back in their remote villages. But there's hardly any work and people are trapped in the camps—afraid to venture very far to farm or gather firewood. Resentment is building inexorably.

"They are just sitting there in the camps. There is no work for the youth, so they sit there thinking about their farmlands, thinking about the other people who have driven them out and are enjoying their land," said Adam Ateem, director of protection and peacebuilding for an aid operation sponsored jointly by Caritas Internationalis and Action by Churches Together. "They are thinking, even the small children, that one day they'll have to go and fight those people to get their land back. The longer they're in the camps the more they begin to think in very negative ways. This is a source of support for the rebel groups, and if they don't have work many will join the rebels if given an opportunity.

"The situation in the camps is a foundation for future conflicts. We have to find a solution for people in the camps. They're just learning to hate Arab people even more, and that's dangerous for society," Ateem said.

Aid groups working in the Darfur camps, including church agencies like Ateem's, face a dilemma: they are allowed into the region only with permission from the Khartoum regime, and criticism of the government's policies can get them booted out of Darfur, as happened in 2006 to the Norwegian Refugee Council. While aid workers are motivated by the humanitarian mandate to help the displaced, they would prefer that the *génocidaires* stop going after more victims. The concerted international political pressure necessary to make that happen has not materialized.

Until recently, Europe snoozed through the ethnic cleansing and the Arab countries looked the other way. The U.S. was conflicted; the Bush administration—when it could tear itself away from Iraq—was uncomfortable with the violence but didn't want to risk losing the intelligence on al-Qaeda that it was getting from people like Salah Abdala Gosh, the head of Sudan's secret police and one of the main architects of the counterinsurgency-by-genocide program. When in 2006 it finally responded to broad public pressure to do something, the White House sent an emissary, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, to peace talks in Nigeria. Zoellick knew a lot

about international trade (he had recently negotiated the Central American Free Trade Agreement) but little about Africa. His heavy-handed lobbying produced a partial peace treaty that not only failed to end the repression, but also atomized the rebel movement into more than a dozen groups, making any eventual peace negotiations much more difficult.

China has been the most significant outside player in the Darfur tragedy. A permanent member of the UN Security Council, China made sure that an African Union peacekeeping mission, on the ground in Darfur since 2004, was given such a weak mandate that it ended up only making matters worse. The mission itself became a target for attacks. China is backing the wrong guys throughout Africa in pursuit of material resources; from Sudan it gets more than 7 percent of the oil it needs for its red-hot economy. Responding to activist movie stars and others who began talking about boycotting the “Genocide Olympics” next year, Beijing has modified its support for Khartoum’s policies and acquiesced in late July to Security Council approval of a new peacekeeping force to take over from the beleaguered AU mission.

The 26,000 soldiers and police of the UN force will operate under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which grants them the right to use force to protect civilians. Yet they will have no authority to seize weapons from belligerents, nor is there any provision for sanctioning the Khartoum regime if it continues its noncompliance with Security Council resolutions. Neither is the new force mandated to deal with the spillover of the violence into neighboring Chad and the Central African Republic.

It will take months for the UN force to get enough boots on the ground to have any impact. By then the pressing question will be: Exactly what peace are the peacekeepers keeping? In places like Bela, it’s very peaceful today, but only because the former residents of Bela are crowded into camps for the internally displaced.

Though most of the African farming villages in Darfur have already been destroyed, government bombings and Arab militia raids have continued, apparently in an effort to dislodge those who dare cling to their huts and farms. Between January and August, 240,000 more people were forcibly displaced in Darfur, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Crowded camps for the displaced have reached such size that relief officials are researching sites for new camps.

Fatma Omar was one of those who resisted: she and her husband stubbornly refused to leave their remote farm despite repeated raids by Arab militias. At times she and her family would flee to hide in the desert for several days until it was safe to return home. But in mid-July the attackers came again, this time, she said, killing her husband, raping her and burning their thatched home.

So she took her four children, the eldest 13 years old, and trekked for 15 days through the countryside to reach the Hassa Hissa camp outside Zalingei on July 27. As she waited for United Nations camp managers to provide her a card for food rations, she borrowed a tarp and stretched it across the weathered walls of an abandoned hut. Then she sat down in the dust in front of her new home and stared across the landscape in the direction of her old life. “Now I have nothing,” she said, her hand aimlessly drawing circles in the sand.

See October 2, 2007, issue of the Christian Century *for the photographs by Paul Jeffrey that accompanied this essay.*