Meanwhile in Darfur: The U.S. does little and the rest of the world does less

From the Editors in the October 19, 2004 issue

What happened to the United Nations?" asked Haruun Ruun, executive secretary of the New Sudan Council of Churches. "The killings and rapes are still happening in Darfur." Ruun was in New York last month to press the UN to impose sanctions on the Sudan government, which has implicitly backed the marauding Arab militias that have terrorized the black population in western Sudan. For almost two years the guerrilla forces have systematically raped women, murdered as many as 50,000 people and created in the process more than a million refugees in Sudan and neighboring Chad.

The U.S. has done what it could to respond to these atrocities. It has urged the UN to impose stronger economic sanctions on the regime in Khartoum, including on its oil revenues. It has called on the UN to authorize more African Union troops as peacemakers in the Darfur region. It has given over $200 million in relief aid this year—about half the amount that the UN asked the world to provide. (Aid agencies have criticized Japan, France and Italy for their meager contributions.)

In early September, Secretary of State Colin Powell termed the killings and dislocations "genocide," hoping to increase the political and moral pressure on Khartoum and encourage other nations to exert their influence.

But identifying the scope of the evil does not ensure that anything will be done about it. What else could be done? The possibility that U.S. troops might be sent to the region was lightly touched upon by John Kerry in the September 30 presidential debate, but it was clear that he has little interest in a significant intervention, and President Bush even less. With the U.S. military overextended and bogged down in Iraq, such a move is barely on the horizon in American politics. Even if the U.S. had the will for such action, it has little credibility in the world to pursue another

intervention, especially not in another Arab-led and Muslim-led country.

For the past half century, human rights activists and legal experts have sought ways to prevent genocide. The signers of the Geneva Convention of 1948 (which include the U.S. and Sudan) declare that genocide is a “crime under international law,” and they resolve “to prevent and to punish” it. In the 1990s strong arguments were developed on behalf of “humanitarian interventions” in Bosnia and Kosovo. Actual preventive action, however, continues to depend on where in the world the genocide takes place, and on which nations have the capacity and will to act. After 50 years of noble, earnest efforts to make acts of genocide impossible to carry out, the nations have managed only to make them slightly more difficult.