

Brian Steidle was a senior operations officer with the Joint Military Commission in the Nuba Mountains of southern Sudan and an unarmed military observer and U.S. representative with the African Union monitoring the ceasefire in Darfur between rebel groups and the government of Sudan.



Ceasefire, Sudan Style

A Photographic Essay on Darfur

Brian Steidle

The world finds ready reasons for averting its eyes from the grisly realities in Sudan's Darfur region, where thousands continue to be slaughtered during a phantom "ceasefire." A distracted America is elsewhere preoccupied, an inward-looking Europe lacks the resolve to act, and an impoverished Africa, beset by a dozen conflicts, has neither the funds nor the capacity to do more than monitor the ongoing massacres in Darfur—which continue, even as Sudan has finally this year ended its decades-long war with the non-Islamic south.

It thus serves many interests to know as little as decently possible about Darfur in western Sudan, where war, hunger, and pestilence stalk an estimated 1.5 million people. A fourth of the region's inhabitants have been driven from their homes, either by government forces or their allied irregular militia, the Janjaweed (the name is said to mean "devil on a horse"). The war pits the Arab-led Khartoum regime against a largely African but also Muslim population consisting of settled farmers and nomadic herders. It needs adding that Sudan's 35 million people are divided into 19 major Arab and African ethnic groups, meaning tribal rivalries and a profusion of languages invariably complicates disputes in a country poor in traditions of tolerance. There are rarely neat fault lines. In Darfur, for example, the Sudanese Liberation Army brings together Darfur's Islamists and secular rebels in opposing Khartoum's forces and its militias.

Washington has creditably joined in pressing the United Nations Security Council to exhort Sudan to halt the killings. But three council resolutions adopted in the past year have signally failed to abate the bloodletting. Following a forthright report by a U.N. commission of inquiry detailing genocidal crimes, the council is at press time weighing yet another hortatory resolution lacking real teeth. With that in mind, it is our privilege to publish this graphic essay by an American whose unsettling duty it was to monitor the sham ceasefire. He here explains his purpose.

—*The Editors*

My name is Brian Steidle. I grew up living around the world as the son of an American naval officer, now a retired admiral. This included two years in the Philippines, which greatly influenced my desire to work on a global scale helping the less fortunate. I graduated with a B.S. from Virginia Polytechnic Institute in 1999 and received a commission in the U.S. Marine Corps as an infantry officer. I completed my service at the end of 2003 as a captain. In January 2004, I accepted a contract position with the Joint Military Commission in the Nuba Mountains of southern Sudan facilitating the North-South ceasefire preceding the recent peace treaty. Within seven months I worked my way up from a team leader to senior operations officer.

I was then invited to serve in Darfur as an unarmed military observer and U.S. representative with the African Union (AU). I was one of three Americans serving with a coalition of African countries monitoring the ceasefire between the two African rebel groups and the government of Sudan. I was armed only with a pen and camera; my reports were my ammunition. Our mission was to report on the violations of the ceasefire agreement, including attacks on villages, troop movements, and military operations. While conducting these investigations, we observed torched villages, hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians, and the effects of such violent atrocities as the rape of women, the torture of men, and the murder of children.

My conscience would no longer allow me to stand by without taking further action, and I became convinced that I could be more effective by bringing the story of what I witnessed to the world. I am now working with my sister, Gretchen Steidle Wallace, founder of Global Grassroots, a nonprofit organization, to lead a social movement to raise public awareness about the atrocities in Sudan and seek international support for the African Union in stopping the violence.

The three most important points that I implore the wider world to consider are (1) that the atrocities resulting in millions displaced and hundreds of thousands killed are ongoing and must be addressed urgently before thousands more die; (2) that these crimes against humanity result from a government-sponsored military operation that is systematically eliminating the black African population from all of Darfur; (3) that this conflict can be resolved through weapons sanctions, a no-fly zone throughout Darfur, and greater international support for an expanded mandate for the African Union.

Darfur: The Violence Continues

My military observer team was made up of representatives from the two rebel groups, the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), and the government of Sudan, a Chadian mediator, a team leader and assistant team leaders from the member countries of the African Union, and either a European Union or U.S. representative. Every day we would investigate violations of the ceasefire agreement, including attacks by any parties to the agreement or military troop movements not approved by the AU.

Day after day, we saw villages of up to 20,000 inhabitants burned to the ground, with nothing left of them but the ash outlines of charred homes and fences. In my team's area of operation, which was southern Darfur, I estimate that nearly 75 percent of the villages had been decimated as of the beginning of February. We saw scores of dead bodies with evidence of torture—arms bound, males castrated, children beaten to death, body parts removed—and execution-style killing. In the village of Um Louta, which was destroyed in early November 2004, we found evidence that many of the 37 people who had been killed had been locked in their huts and burned alive. We interviewed women who had been gang raped. I received one report that cited around 70 rapes in refugee camps over a period of a few days.

Women and children bear the greatest burden of this conflict. The internally displaced persons (IDP) camps are filled with families that have lost their fathers. When women venture out of the camps in search of firewood and water, they face the almost certain risk of being raped. Men who leave the camps face castration and death. So the families decide that rape is the lesser evil. Nor have the children been spared; many are missing. When women are finally able to return to their villages, they may have to support themselves alone. Many rape victims are ostracized and others face unwanted pregnancies.

This February apparently saw a decrease in overall violence in Darfur. However, last December and this past January were among the most violent months of the entire conflict, following a similar lull in November. I do not believe the current relative calm is necessarily an indication that the conflict is ending.

A Government-Sponsored Military Operation

I have evidence that the atrocities committed in Darfur are the direct result of a Sudanese government military operation in collaboration with the Janjaweed militias. Government forces and Arab militias regularly attack a village together. Helicopter gunships support the Arab militias on the ground. Before these attacks occur, the cellphone systems are shut down by the government so that villagers cannot warn each other. Most of the time, the gunships fire antipersonnel rockets. These rockets contain flashettes, or small nails with a stabilizing fin on the back. Each gunship contains 4 rocket pods, each rocket pod contains about 20 rockets, and each rocket contains about 500 of these flashettes. Flashettes are used only to kill or maim people on the ground. Flashette wounds look like shotgun wounds. One small child I saw looked as if his back had been shredded. We got him to a hospital, but we did not expect him to live.

On many occasions when we attempted to investigate one of these attacks, we would find that fuel for our helicopters was unavailable. There were many explanations from the Sudanese supplier, from “We are out of fuel” to “Our fuel pumps are broken.” However, government gunships continued to fly.

Villagers who were able to escape alive flocked to IDP camps, where they would scrounge for sticks and plastic bags to construct shelters from the sun and wind. But more misery awaited the refugees. The government would first announce the need to relocate a particular camp and assess its population, often grossly underestimating the number of refugees. A new camp would be built by the international aid organizations, and then the government would forcibly relocate refugees, leaving hundreds or thousands without shelter. Then the government would bulldoze and burn the vacated camps.

The difference between the government and the rebel groups is that, in the majority of cases, the latter forces target military and police positions, while the government targets civilians. The rebels attack to acquire ammunition, weapons, and logistical stores, and to show the government that they are still a force to be reckoned with. I believe that one of the purposes of the government attacks is to kill as many African tribespeople as possible and drive the rest from Darfur.

In mid-December 2004, I was standing next to a brigadier general in the Sudanese army on the outskirts of the village of Labado, population approximately 20,000. The village had just been attacked, and to our knowledge, most people had been driven out or killed. The Janjaweed, who had attacked the village in the company of government forces, were still in the village shooting their weapons, burning huts, and looting. I asked the general—whose orders were to “protect the civilian populations and open the roads for commercial traffic”—why he would not stop the attacks. He replied that the Janjaweed were not his troops and he did not have control over them. And yet I saw truckloads of his men, in uniform, coming from behind his military position, traveling into the village to loot and burn huts in front of our eyes.

What Can We Do?

I believe this conflict can be resolved through international pressure on Khartoum and support of the African Union. More specifically, I believe weapons sanctions and a no-fly zone

throughout Darfur are critical. I have witnessed the effectiveness of the African Union and believe it can stop the conflict if it gets more support. For example, after the attack on Labado, the government general told us that his mission was to continue clearing the route all the way to Khartoum, several hundred kilometers away. The next village in line was Muhajeryia, possibly twice the size of Labado. When I arrived in Darfur, just three months earlier, the Sudanese Liberation Army controlled probably 75 percent of the territory. At this point, Muhajeryia was one of only two or three SLA strongholds left in southern Darfur. The African Union was able to place 35 soldiers in Muhajeryia. Their mission was not to protect the village, but to protect the civilian contractors establishing a base camp for future deployment. But this was enough to deter the government forces and the Janjaweed from attacking. That respite enabled the AU to deploy 70 more soldiers from the protection force and ten military observers in Labado. Within one week, approximately 3,000 people returned to rebuild their homes there. Soon afterward, the AU was able to negotiate the withdrawal of government troops from the area.

People at the grassroots level worldwide have the power individually to help stop the killing. It is critical for individuals to contact their government leaders and ask them to take action. Speak out and tell others of the atrocities. If we do this, we might be able to stop a genocide in the making. ●



Sudanese Liberation Army Soldiers in Haskanita: This is a typical deployment of the lightly armed forces now fighting well-equipped Janjaweed and government troops.



Marla, December 17, 2004: Sudanese government soldiers looting goods from a store they have recently broken into in the village of Marla. This is a common occurrence in all villages they destroy. Part of the pay of the Janjaweed comes from the loot that they are authorized and encouraged by the government to steal from the villages they attack.



Um Ziefa, December 12, 2004: Sudanese soldiers and the Janjaweed had just set this village compound ablaze. Sections of the village had been burned previously, and the Janjaweed returned to complete their mission.



Alliet, October 23, 2004: Ashes are all that remain of this village. Evidence confirmed that many civilians were locked in their huts before they were set on fire.



Um Louta: One of many huts burned to the ground in this village, and the charred belongings of the family that had lived there. The level horizon suggests the difficulty of seeking cover.



Menawashi, January 20, 2005: Some 7,000 refugees fled to the outskirts of the village of Menawashi a few days after repeated attacks on the villages of Hamada and Jurof by government and Janjaweed forces. Southern Darfur now contends with an estimated 500,000 refugees.



Al Geer IDP Camp: The government of Sudan determined that an estimated 500 refugees in the Al Geer camp on the outskirts of Nyala needed to be relocated. In fact, aid organizations reckoned the population at closer to 5,000 refugees. Nevertheless, the government allowed aid organizations to build a new camp for only 500 refugees, then bulldozed this camp, pushing all the debris into a pile to be burned.



Marlam, January 23, 2005: This corpse was unidentified; it is not clear whether the man was an attacker or a civilian.



Adwa, December 14, 2004: Another victim of the conflict. This man was executed with a shot to the head, then left to predators.