The Darfur Atrocities Documentation Project

Samuel Totten

I was deeply honored when, a few months ago, officials from the Coalition for International Justice (CIJ) asked me to join the U.S. State Department’s Darfur Atrocities Documentation Team. The team was being sent to Chad to conduct interviews with Sudanese refugees. It is one thing to spend one’s life engaged in scholarship about genocide, and quite another to go into the field to ascertain whether a genocide is being perpetrated.

Over the past year and a half there has been ever-increasing concern over the violent conflict in Sudan. Deciding that more than monitoring was needed, the Darfur Documentation Interview Project (more recently referred to by the U.S. State Department as the Atrocities Documentation Team) was established as a joint effort of the State Department, CIJ, and the American Bar Association (ABA). More specifically, the Darfur project sent two teams of twelve investigators each to various points along the Chad/Sudan border in late July and early August of 2004 to conduct randomly selected interviews with Sudanese refugees from the Darfur conflict, where ethnic cleansing, rape, and targeted killing of tribal groups (primarily, the Masaleit, Fur, and Zaghawa) has resulted in an estimated 1.5 million people being driven from their homes and more than 50,000 dead, thus far. The United Nations also fears that over a million refugees are in danger of starving to death in the near future. Most of the victims are Muslims, as are their attackers.

One of the many important aspects of the Darfur Atrocities Documentation
Project was that it set a precedent for what the U.S. and/or other nations can, and should do, when future cases of potential genocide arise. Far too often in the recent past, the international community (the United Nations, individual governments, many nongovernmental agencies, and the general public) has relied on journalistic accounts to gain a sense of whether genocide was being carried out in a particular region of the world. However, the latter reports were often sporadic and contradictory.

In late June 2004, CIJ began soliciting the names of potential volunteer interviewers, and within a two-week period it had received more than 400 responses. By July 15th, days before it sent its first team of twelve interviewers to Chad, CIJ had more than 600 responses from individuals willing to travel to Chad to take part in the project. Ultimately, CIJ selected twenty-four “investigators” to carry out the interviews. In selecting the investigators, CIJ was intent on putting together teams based on the investigators’ backgrounds, expertise, and experience. The first team, of which I was a member, was comprised, in part, of the following individuals: four former field investigators with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY); two genocide scholars (Eric Markusen and myself); a prosecutor with the United States Department of Justice, who had previously served as a prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda; a specialist in humanitarian emergencies who had served in Iraq, Niger, Bosnia, Rwanda and Congo; and a law student specializing in human rights.

After flying from their respective homes to Paris, the members of the first team flew to N’Djamena, Chad, and from there were flown east across Chad to the isolated desert town of Abeche on small planes (ranging in size from five seaters to twenty seaters) where they received a half-day briefing by, among others, CIJ staff, members of the U.S. State Department, and specialists in interviewing procedures.

Each team was assigned to a refugee camp along the Chad/Sudan border—one in the north, one centrally located, and one in the south. The next day, my two-person team flew south in a five-seat bush plane to Goz Beida, a tiny village that was obviously a skeleton of its former self when it had served as a French outpost. Immediately, a series of morning meetings were held with the sultan of Goz Beida, the two unduns (head chiefs) of the refugee camp, and a series of sheikhs who were responsible for separate blocks within the 13,500-person camp. During the course of each meeting with these dignitaries, the team members introduced themselves, explained the purpose of the Darfur Documentation Interview Project, and sought permission to interview the refugees. All of the meetings were held over hot cups of sweet tea, and attended by curious onlookers from the village (in the case of the sultan) and the refugee camp (in the case of the unduns and the sheikhs). While the meeting with the sultan was held in his dilapidated walled compound in Goz Beida, the meetings with the unduns and sheikhs took place on large brightly colored rugs under a tree or on a rug under a makeshift canopy of tree branches, twigs, and leaves.

The refugee camp at Goz Beida consisted of five large sections, each of which was divided into four to six blocks. The camp sweltered in the heat on a dry, dusty plain encircled by a small ring of mountains. The refugees were largely housed in UN-issued tents, which could hold two adults and two children comfortably but were often packed with six to eight people. The tents had dirt floors and were generally bereft of anything but rudimentary hand-made beds, a few blackened pots and pans, a bombi (a small handmade stool made from tree branches and thin pieces of cowhide), and a rug or tarp that partially covered the ground. In the immediate area surrounding each tent, there was generally a small open cooking area, more battered cooking utensils, and, in some cases, a branch and twig canopy to sit under during the heat of the day. Occasionally, an emaciated goat, a donkey, or a couple of sheep foraged amongst the tents for what little there was to eat in the dirt and sand.

In order to ensure that the selection of refugees was random, we, the interviewers, attempted to interview one person in every tenth tent. Once at a tent, we used a simple “decision-making grid” located on the first page of the questionnaire to select an interviewee, making sure that he or she was eighteen years of age or older.

All of the investigators used the same set of questions delineated on the Darfur Refugees Questionnaire, which was developed by CIJ staff, U.S. State Department staff, and members of various nongovernmental agencies based in the United States. At the outset of each interview, the investigator had his or her interpreter (Sudanese individuals, many of whom had fled Sudan themselves, who spoke Arabic and one or more of the tribal languages found in Sudan) introduce him or her (the investigator) and explain the nature and purpose of the interview. Potential interviewees were informed that we were there to speak with them about their experiences in the Darfur region of Sudan, that all information would remain confidential, as would their name, and that taking part in the interview did not guarantee compensation for losses or deaths experienced by their household nor did it mean that they or the individuals in their household would necessarily be able to testify at trials or bring specific charges against anyone. They were also told that their decision to participate in the interview was entirely voluntary, and that if they chose not to be interviewed then their decision would be respected.

Among the questions each interviewer asked during the 50- to 120-minute interviews were the following: When did you leave your village? Why did you leave your village? What happened to you? Were you physically harmed? Did those who harmed or attacked you say anything to you? Did the attackers say anything to each other during the event? Were any members of your household harmed? In what way? Were your household’s water or food stores taken away or destroyed? If so, how? Were your cattle stolen? Did you see anyone else in your village being harmed or taken away? How were they harmed? Was your village attacked/destroyed? If so, how and to what extent (e.g., burning/
shelling, partial/complete)? Were there any particular groups or types of people who were spared from harm? Why do you think they did this to you, your household, or your village? Since leaving your village, have any members of your household or village died on the journey to this camp? If so, how? and, Since leaving your village, have you personally witnessed attacks on other people or villages?

In the vast majority of cases, the individuals asked to be interviewed were quite willing to do so. For many, it seemed somewhat cathartic to relate their story. For others, there was the hope, despite the caveat issued at the beginning of the interviews, that by telling their story they would have a better chance of returning to their land and of regaining that which had been stolen from them. This was true whether the interviewee was an old, wrinkled man of eighty-seven covered in rags, a young widow dressed in a brilliant colored flowing dress, or a young man in a white jalabiya-like smock who insisted on showing the wounds he had suffered as a result of being shot in his village by the Janjaweed (Arab militia on horseback or camels).

Each investigator interviewed between four and seven refugees per day. Thus, for example, I conducted a total of forty-nine interviews during my two weeks in the field. As one might imagine, the findings of each interviewer were extensive; space constraints preclude a detailed discussion of even a fraction of the most important ones. What is delineated below is an overview of some of the more telling findings I gleaned from the interviews. For explanatory purposes, I have also provided a brief commentary regarding the significance of each finding.

**Racial Epithets**

**Findings**: During the course of the attacks by the Sudanese military and the Arab militia on black Africans, the latter have been the brunt of a slew of dehumanizing racial epithets. Among some of the many epithets or verbal attacks that the victims reported to have been called are: “Nuba” (which is used by the Arabs as a slur to denote “slave”); “slaves”; “slave dogs”; “You are not a real Sudanese, you’re black”; “No blacks need to stay here”; “You are Nuba, nothing but slaves”; “You are Nuba slaves. Go away from here. You are not Sudanese”; “You are the son of a dog”; “You are Tora Bora (terrorists) and do not belong here”; and “The president of Sudan ordered us to cleanse Darfur of the dirty slaves in order to establish the beginning of the Arab Union.”

**Significance**: First, it is clear from the epithets that a specific group of people, the black Africans of Darfur, was being targeted for expulsion or death by their attackers. Second, there is a long history in the field of genocide studies showing that a precursor to many genocidal incidents is name-calling—in this case, the Darfur Africans were maligned as “dogs,” which is a classic case of the victim group being disparaged as less than human. (In this regard, it is worth noting that during the Holocaust, the Nazis referred to the Jews as leeches and bloodsuckers; during the course of the Anfal in Iraq in 1988, an Iraqi commander referred to the Kurds as “insects”; and during the course of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the Hutus regularly referred to the Tutsis as *injenzi*, or “cockroaches.”) Third, based upon the accounts given by the refugees, the militia actually stated that their directives came from the Sudanese government, if not the president himself. Fourth, it is evident that at least one goal of the attackers was to rid Darfur of black Africans. Fifth, the attackers seem to have perceived all black Africans in Darfur as one in the same by referring to innocent men, women, and children as “Tora Bora,” or renegades out to destroy Sudan.

**Systematic Nature of the Attacks and the Plundering of Villages**

**Findings**: As previously mentioned, hundreds of villages of black Africans have been attacked, and are continuing to be attacked, by the Sudanese government troops and Arab militia—some of whom, as previously mentioned, are known as Janjaweed. Often the attacks are initially carried out by Sudanese government soldiers and/or militia in land-cruisers, which are sometimes accompanied by Antonov airplanes dropping bombs. These initial attacks are almost always and immediately followed up by attacks carried out by scores, if not hundreds, of Janjaweed on horseback and camels. While the planes...
and bombs both terrorize the villagers and destroy large swaths of the village, the army, Arab militia and Janjaweed attack homes, beat or kill inhabitants, plunder livestock and other goods, and then burn the entire village to the ground.

I personally gathered information about how five villages in a row had been attacked on the same day in the same way. In each case, military troops initially rounded up villagers under the guise of collecting taxes only to attack the villagers once they were all out in the open.

**Significance:** The fact that the attacks and destruction of villages are systematic versus sporadic and random suggests that the attacks against the black Africans are well planned, coordinated, and a result of purposeful activity. Put another way, based on the evidence collected, the government of Sudan is colluding with the Arab militia. Furthermore, the systematic nature of the attacks, along with the killing and rapes, are evidence of an intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a specific group of people (the black Africans of Darfur)—all of which, again, comes under the definition of genocide in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide.

### Massive Displacement of Individuals and Entire Communities from their Land and Villages

**Actions:** The individuals interviewed talked about how entire villages were emptied of all their inhabitants, except for those who were Arabs, or except for black Darfur Africans who were killed and left unburied. Person after person spoke about either being beaten or wounded, witnessing the beating or killing of loved ones, and being forced to leave his or her village with nothing but the clothes on his or her back. Time and again, interviewees talked about losing all of their worldly goods, including their cattle, which constituted their main form of wealth, and being forced up into the mountains or into valleys where they hid in fear of being hunted down and killed.

The United Nations asserts that the approximately one million people who have been displaced are barely eking out an existence in the mountains of Sudan, in internally displaced persons camps inside Sudan, or in refugee camps just inside Chad. I can attest to the validity of the statement in regard to those refugees now residing in the refugee camp at Goz Beida in Chad.

**Significance:** One international organization after another, including the United Nations, has deemed the situation in Darfur to be the major humanitarian crisis facing the world today. Various human rights officials and activists have argued that it would be more appropriate to deem it the major human rights crisis facing the world today. No matter what it is called, the situation demands immediate attention by the United Nations and all those who subscribe to the UN Declaration of Human Rights. That means that the killing must be stopped immediately. It also means that the destruction of villages must be halted immediately and that all displaced people within Sudan should be escorted to well-guarded safe areas within the country. Finally, it means that the basic needs (food, water, medicine, and housing) of all refugees, whether in Sudan or Chad, must be met; and this must be done sooner rather than later.

### Culpability of Government—Coordinated Attacks by Sudanese Military, Arab Militia, and Janjaweed

**Findings:** Based on the interviews we conducted, it is evident as previously mentioned that the attacks on the black Africans of Darfur are part of a systematic, well-planned, and coordinated effort of the Sudanese military, Arab militia, and Janjaweed. In almost every attack described to me, the Sudanese military was involved.
in one way or another—either by arriving in land-cruisers first, accompanied by bombers and helicopters, or by choking off one part of a village while the other part was choked off by the Arab militia or Janjaweed.

**Significance:** The Sudanese government has repeatedly denied claims that it is either behind or in collusion with the Arab militias and Janjaweed in the attacks that have been and continue to be carried out in Darfur. All evidence, however, points to the contrary. The systematic nature of the attacks, the bombing of the villages (which the Arab militia could not do for it does not have access to aircraft), the hundreds of descriptions by the victims of the perpetrators appearing in Sudanese military vehicles and uniforms, and first-person accounts of the military providing the Janjaweed with weapons all call into question the veracity of the Sudanese government’s assertions.

**Mass Rape**

**Findings:** People I interviewed told me about numerous rapes perpetrated against young black African women by both Sudanese soldiers and Arab militia. Some of those who related the stories were themselves the women who had been raped. Most, as one might imagine, had an excruciatingly difficult time relating the events, and many broke down and cried for a period of time as they attempted to do so.

Some of the rapes took place in their homes or on the streets, literally, of the victims’ villages. Even more took place in the mountains and valleys of western Sudan. In some cases, the victims were so brutalized by the gang rapes that they were not able to walk in the aftermath of the attack and thus had to be carried to safety across the border to Chad. Still other women were reported to have been gang raped and then shot in the legs so they could not walk. Other young girls and women were allegedly abducted, raped, and turned into concubines. Some were reported to have been taken to Khartoum for the pleasure of Sudanese troops.

The United Nations reports that hundreds of such rapes have taken place—and continue to take place to this day.

**Significance:** Such brutality against young girls and women in yet another ethnic conflict underscores the critical need for the international community to act sooner rather than later to assist those populations who are under violent attack, for far too often girls and women are the brunt of vicious attacks that violate their very selfhood.

As of late, the international community has begun to recognize and prosecute mass rape as an act of genocide. In her book, War Crimes Against Women: Prosecution in International War Crimes Tribunals, Kelly Dawn Askin argues, “gender abuses, including genocidal rape, can be prosecuted as genocide under Article 4 of the ICTY Statute.” “Genocidal rape” has been defined as “an attempt to destroy, in whole or in part, a particular protected group through sexual assault, regardless of whether the destruction is physical or mental.”

**State Department Analysis**

On September 9, 2004, the U.S. State Department released its analysis based on the data collected by the Darfur Atrocities Documentation Team. In its summary of the findings, the State Department reported the following:

A U.S. Government project to conduct systematic interviews of Sudanese refugees in Chad reveals a consistent and widespread pattern of atrocities committed against non-Arab villagers in the Darfur region of western Sudan. This assessment is based on semi-structured interviews with 1,136 randomly selected refugees in 19 locations in eastern Chad. Most respondents said government forces, militia fighters or a combination of both had completely destroyed their villages. Sixty-one percent of the respondents witnessed the killing of a family member, 16 percent said they had been raped or had heard about a rape from a victim. About one-third of the refugees heard racial epithets while under attack. Four-fifths said their livestock was stolen, nearly half asserted their personal property was looted.

**Conclusion**

Both the United States’ sponsorship of the Darfur Documentation Team and the State Department’s findings based on the analysis of the data collected constitute historic occasions. For the first time in history, a national government—the United States—established a project for the express purpose of attempting to ascertain whether a violent conflict in progress constituted genocide or not. As a result, the Darfur Atrocities Documentation Project has established a significant precedent in regard to how individual nations and groups of nations can systematically collect key data in order to determine whether genocide is taking place in a region of the world.

On September 9, 2004, based on the data collected by the Darfur Atrocity Documentation Team, Colin Powell declared that the killing in Sudan constituted genocide. This was the first time since the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide that a sovereign nation accused another sovereign nation of having committed genocide. That the State Department declared the situation to be genocide is of great import in that it comes from the executive branch of government, which, in turn, deals directly with the United Nations. The UN has the wherewithal, if it so chooses, to engage in military intervention in order to halt the genocide. The significance of the State Department-sponsored project and subsequent declaration should not be underestimated in a world of realpolitik, where nations would rather look the other way when genocide is taking place in order to avoid making new enemies or having to follow through on its moral obligation to act to staunch the genocide.

**Now What?**

Each month thousands of people in Darfur continue to be murdered, starved to death or perish from illnesses as a direct result of the attacks by the Sudanese government.
troops and the Janjaweed. In fact, over the past two months estimates of the dead have risen to more than 50,000. And yet, the international community has continued to debate whether the deaths are a direct result of genocide or not.

Even if some international body comes to the conclusion that genocide has not been perpetrated, the fact is that not only have tens of thousands already been killed but thousands more are likely to be in the months to come.

Thus, the most pressing current need is for immediate international military intervention in Sudan to ensure that the killing is halted, the forced exodus of refugees is stemmed, and security measures are put in place so that the refugees can return home to rebuild their lives. Only strong international action on the ground is going to bring an end to the genocidal actions.

If the UN Security Council plays a game of realpolitik and refuses to send in troops or, ultimately, passes a resolution with a weak mandate (e.g., a “slow calendar” of mobilization, and too few or poorly trained troops that are under-resourced), then individual nations must step up and form a coalition to do so. Anything less constitutes complicity in the ongoing atrocities.

Not only would the establishment of an anti-genocide intervention force meet the current needs of the people of Darfur, but it would also reinforce one of the most positive trends that has taken place in international affairs during the last decade—the increased international willingness to combat genocide that has been set in motion by the trials at the International Criminal Court for the Former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Court for Rwanda.

It does no one any good to have something deemed genocide if nothing is done to staunch the killing. Concerned citizens should contact their members of Congress and call upon them to urge the United Nations and/or the U.S. government to take the necessary actions to prevent genocide. Time is of the essence.  

Notes
2. Ibid., 12.

Samuel Totten, a scholar of genocide studies at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, was a member of the 24-person Darfur Atrocities Documentation Team. His latest book, co-edited with William S. Parsons, and Israel W. Charny, is Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts (New York: Routledge, 2004). Among other books he has edited, co-edited or written on genocide are Teaching about Genocide: Issues, Approaches and Resources; Pioneers of Genocide Studies; Genocide in the Twentieth Century: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts; and First Person Accounts of Genocide Committed in the Twentieth Century: An Annotated Bibliography. He is also the author of numerous published articles and essays on the subject.