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Why Darfur (and Why Not the D. R. Congo)? :

Tracing a Conflict's Rise from Media Obscurity

Virgil HAWKINS*

Abstract

Africa's conflicts have remained largely absent from the US media agenda since the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide in the mid-1990s. This changed in 2004, when a conflict in Darfur began to attract and sustain moderately high levels of attention. This paper explores the factors behind Darfur's rise on the media agenda. It concludes that a combination of US national/political interest, timing (notably the coincidence of the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide), and the simplified framing of the conflict as a case of genocide, gave Darfur its place in the spotlight.

Keywords : Darfur, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), media coverage, genocide, Africa

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1. Introduction

Conflicts in Africa are generally marginalized by most of the world's media outside the continent, despite the fact that they are usually far greater in scale than most conflicts occurring elsewhere. The standard explanations for this state of affairs are that Africa has little relevance in terms of national interests, and that sympathy is difficult to mobilize for non-white victims in a white-dominated world. These explanations are, however, too simplistic, and the fact is, not all conflicts in Africa are treated with such indifference. Why, for example, has Rwanda left such a mark on our collective consciences, yet Burundi may as well not have happened at all, despite the fact that large-scale massacres occurred under very similar circumstances? 50,000 people were killed there in just one week in October 1993, and the total death toll of 300,000 still exceeds any recent conflict outside the African continent, with the exception of Iraq and Afghanistan. Why is there such concern over democracy and human rights issues in Zimbabwe, when many other African regimes have arguably worse records? And why did conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan suddenly become such a rallying point for humanitarian concern in mid-2004, when conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was far deadlier?

It is this final question that will be the focus of this study, from the perspective of the US media. Conflict in Darfur has attracted more (and more sustained) media attention than any conflict in Africa since the mid-1990s. Especially considering the fact that this conflict was largely ignored during its first year (despite repeated calls of alarm from the UN Secretariat and other humanitarian actors), it is important to examine why it suddenly became the object of concentrated sympathy and indignation.

The most common explanation for the rise of Darfur is the association of the conflict with the possible existence of genocide: the 'g-word' (Mennecke 2007, 57-72), the 'g-bomb' (Prendergast 2007, 352) the 'magic word' (Polgreen 2006). The notion is that genocide 'is big because it carries the Nazi label, which sells well. ... But simply killing is boring, especially in Africa' (Prunier 2006, 201). This is indeed a powerful argument, but it doesn't tell us why the application of the concept of genocide to the Darfur conflict in particular was so effective. The genocide label could conceivably have been applied to a number of other conflicts in Africa. Some have suggested that the representation of the conflict as Arabs killing blacks (rather than blacks killing blacks) was the key factor in this regard (Prunier 2006, 196). Others have noted the link between the rise of Darfur and the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide (Straus 2006, 51). US political concerns have also been raised as factors affecting attention devoted to the conflict in Darfur (IISS 2005, 1-2; ICG 2004, 25-6; Fake and Funk 2009).

But much of this explanation is in passing. The vast majority of analysis on the issue of Darfur appears to have concerned itself with following the genocide trail: how does Darfur compare to the Rwandan genocide? Can the conflict be called genocide? What are the political, legal and moral repercussions of such a verdict

(Grzyb 2009; Glanville 2009)? Given the rarity of such sustained media Western attention being devoted to an African conflict, however, it is critical that we make a more concerted attempt to understand the conflict's rise on the agenda. Considering that levels of attention towards Darfur have been considerably greater in the USA than in other Western countries, the focus will be on the response of the most influential US-based media corporations.

2. Recent African Conflicts and media attention

In November 1996, Rwandan forces entered eastern Zaire, and, together with a local coalition of rebel groups, overran the refugee camps near Goma that had been providing sanctuary for both refugees and those responsible for the genocide in Rwanda (who were using the camps to regroup, rearm and launch attacks on Rwanda). The Western world, which largely stood by and watched as the genocide was carried out, had chosen to express its guilt and belated concern through humanitarian aid directed at these camps. The result was relatively sustained levels of media coverage of the crisis in eastern Zaire. When Rwanda overran the refugee camps, the West appeared to accept that the crisis was now over: a planned intervention force was promptly cancelled and, as far as most in the West were concerned, the horrible chapter was now closed – to be relegated to the history books.

It would be the last time that the US media would take a serious and sustained look at any conflict or crisis in Africa for roughly seven-and-a-half years. Of course, the chapter marked by the Rwandan genocide was far from closed. In fact it was just getting started. Within two years it would lead to the start of the deadliest conflict the world had seen in more than half a century. Rwanda and its allies went on to topple the regime in Zaire (which was renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo), but Rwandan (and Ugandan) forces again entered the country in 1998 after a falling out with the new regime. This time a number of other neighbouring countries came to the aid of the DRC Government, and the DRC became host to a continental conflict, pitting national forces from nine countries, as well as various rebel and militia groups, against each other. Officially, foreign forces had withdrawn by 2003, but the conflict continued to a degree, and it was estimated that by mid-2007, the conflict had been responsible for approximately 5,400,000 deaths (IRC 2008). Yet, despite the unparalleled scale of the crisis, the conflict in the DRC failed to attract any commensurate levels of media attention.

Nor was the DRC the only major conflict in Africa that failed to attract the attention of the outside world. At the turn of the century, conflicts each with death tolls in the hundreds of thousands continued in southern Sudan, Angola, Sierra Leone and Burundi, and large-scale fighting also broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea. With the exception of some moderate attention to conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia, these conflicts were largely ignored by most of the media most of the time. Despite the fact that African conflicts were

responsible for as much as 88 percent of the world’s conflict-related deaths since the end of the Cold War (Hawkins 2008, 25), and that nowhere else were humanitarian needs greater, Africa and its conflicts remained off, or at the bottom of the media agenda.

3. Enter Darfur

Conflict in Darfur began in early 2003 with a series of attacks by rebels (claiming to represent the marginalized and formerly autonomous region), but the rebellion was quickly and brutally countered by Sudanese Government forces and the militia groups they supported (known as the Janjaweed). Media coverage of the conflict, which had been almost non-existent, began to rise in early 2004, and the tone increasingly became that of the ‘something must be done’ variety: an emotive call to action. The conflict never reached ‘chosen’ conflict status (with concentrated levels of coverage that tend to eclipse attention to other events) in the USA (or anywhere else outside the continent) – this seems to be a status usually reserved for conflicts in which the USA or Israel are one of the belligerents. The *New York Times*, for example, devoted more coverage to the first month of the conflict that erupted in Israel-Palestine in late 2000 than it did to the first two years of the conflict in Darfur (based on a word count of relevant articles using LexisNexis).

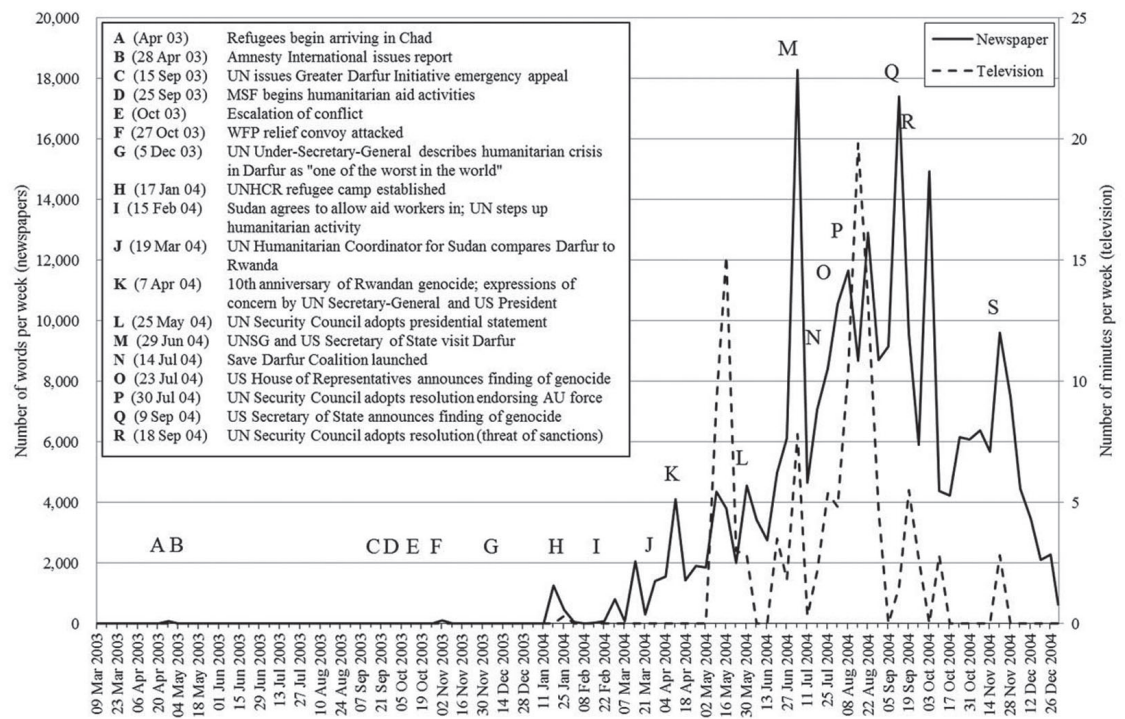


Figure 1 : US media coverage of conflict in Darfur

Nevertheless, attention to the conflict has been moderately high, and is greater and more sustained than that for any other conflict or complex humanitarian crisis in Africa since the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide.

Figure 1 serves as an example of the level of media coverage of Darfur, displaying the number of words per week in key US newspapers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *USA Today*) and the number of minutes per week of television coverage (the evening news of ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox, plus one hour each day of CNN news). It covers the period from the beginning of the conflict in March 2003 to the end of 2004. Newspaper data was sourced using LexisNexis searches (for ‘Darfur’ and ‘Sudan’ in headline and lead paragraphs) and the online archives of the *Los Angeles Times*, while television coverage was sourced using the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. The results were filtered manually to confirm relevance to the conflict in Darfur.

The results reveal an almost total media blackout of the conflict until March 2004, despite the escalation of the conflict and the rise in activities and calls to action by humanitarian actors. Substantial coverage began to appear as the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide approached, and it continued to grow thereafter, with a major spike coinciding with a visit to the region by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and US Secretary of State Colin Powell at the end of June 2004. Importantly, US media attention appears to be much more closely linked to the response to the conflict, rather than to the conflict itself. The rises in coverage generally do not appear to correspond with major rebel, Janjaweed or government offensives, massacres, peace talks or ceasefire agreements, but instead to major external responses, such as statements, visits and decisions made by policymakers.

In all, in the 22 months reviewed, the newspapers examined devoted more than 260,000 words and the television stations 120 minutes to the conflict in Darfur. How does this compare to media attention to the DRC conflict? Coverage by the same media corporations was also examined using the same methodology over a 22-month period (March 2002 to December 2003), which covered the peace process officially ending the international dimension of the conflict; the establishment of a transitional government; and perhaps more importantly, major escalation of violence in the Ituri region (which was also being described as genocidal) and the deployment of a European Union force in response. The total newspaper coverage for Darfur proved to be three times greater than that for the DRC, and television coverage five times greater. Considering that 99 percent of newspaper coverage on Darfur was concentrated in the last ten months of the period examined, the contrast is even starker.

4. A note on conflict scale

Although maintaining any form of accuracy in estimating death tolls from conflicts is notoriously difficult, it appears likely that the death toll in Darfur stands at between 200,000 and 400,000 (Hagan 2008; Dealey

2007). Looking at the timing of the findings and uses of death toll statistics, however, is also crucial in understanding the role of perceived conflict scale in the subsequent response.

When responses to the conflict began to rise in earnest in March/April 2004, attempts to estimate the death toll did not result in particularly high figures by African standards. UN-estimated death tolls were put at 10,000 in March 2004 (McLaughlin 2004), and between 30,000 and 50,000 in July 2004 (BBC News 2004b). *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (2004) was using the figure of 1,000 deaths per week in April 2004, which would be roughly equivalent to 50,000 in one year. Even taking the highest of these figures, 50,000 was 66 times less than the known death toll in the DRC at the time (IRC 2003): the death toll from the Ituri region alone was being estimated at 60,000 in 2003 (*New York Times* 2003b), and it remains far below known death tolls from other conflicts in Africa.

It is also interesting to compare responses to statements by UN officials on the severity of the conflict. On 5 December 2003, UN Under-Secretary-General Jan Egeland stated that ‘the humanitarian situation in Darfur has quickly become one of the worst in the world’ (UN News Centre 2003). This alarming statement from a high-ranking UN official did not appear to spark any interest by the media. Egeland was later mistakenly quoted as calling the crisis ‘the worst’, rather than ‘one of the worst’ (Totten and Markusen 2006, iv). When the UN Coordinator for Sudan (a supposedly less influential post) Mukesh Kapila, described the situation in Darfur as ‘the world’s greatest humanitarian crisis’, on 19 March 2004 (BBC News 2004a), however, it appeared to cause a major reaction from the media. More importantly, he drew a comparison between the conflict and the genocide in Rwanda (as the tenth anniversary of the genocide approached), which was undoubtedly the major cause of the reaction. The notion that the humanitarian situation was *the* worst (not *one of the worst*) in the world stuck (Straus 2005, 123). Egeland clarified the issue in March 2005, stating that the crisis in the DRC ‘is the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world today and it is beyond belief that the world is not paying more attention’ (Reuters 2005). Attention from the media was not forthcoming.

The uses and timing of these phrases and numbers in expressing the relative degree of humanitarian suffering thus suggest that the severity of the conflict in Darfur was less a reason for response, and more a justification for response (or tool for emphasis) after interest had already been generated for other reasons. It is unlikely that the scale of the conflict per se played a major role in the selection of Darfur for attention.

5. Why Darfur ‘should’ have been ignored

The conflict in Darfur was largely ignored by the media for more than one year after it began. The first Western journalist (an independent filmmaker) to report from Darfur did not arrive until January 2004: his interest was apparently sparked by reading Amnesty International reports (Crummy 2007). Looking at patterns of response to conflict in the past (particularly that in Africa), there are ‘good’ reasons why conflict in

Darfur could well have continued its low/non-existent profile on the media. Patterns of response to foreign conflict suggest a number of tentative conditions for a conflict to be singled out for attention: national/political interest, proximity/access, ability to identify, ability to sympathize, simplicity and sensationalism (Hawkins 2008, 189-202). The case of Kosovo in 1999 serves as an example of how these conditions converged to spark high levels of interest in the West. As a conflict on the doorstep of Western Europe that threatened to inundate that region with refugees and cause economic destabilization; and that appeared to be a simple one-sided affair (portrayed as genocide) with 'evil' perpetrators attacking 'helpless' victims who were white and of a relatively high socio-economic status; the conditions for attention were clearly met at most levels.

In many ways, it was a very different story for Darfur. Few of the conditions for attention were present. Admittedly, there were various layers of national/political interest for the USA regarding Sudan, and the strong influence of the policy agenda on the media agenda in general has been well documented (Mermin 1999; Robinson 2001, 527; Zaller and Chui 1996). But many of those policy interests were in fact best served by not rocking the boat, by keeping the issue out of the spotlight. Aside from the fact that, in terms of levels of attention, any world events occurring in 2003 would remain under the shadow cast by the invasion of Iraq, from a US government perspective, taking a strong stance on Darfur threatened to undermine a potential north-south peace deal (Fake and Funk 2009), and to disrupt a pipeline of intelligence on anti-Western terrorism – Sudan was proving cooperative in this regard since September 11 (Huliaras 2006, 721; ICG 2004, 26). In these ways, national/political interests appeared to support a gentle and behind-the-scenes approach to the Darfur conflict, and thus there was little incentive for heavy and emotive media coverage.

Issues of proximity and access also appeared to act as significant barriers to attention for the conflict. Darfur is a vast, remote and highly barren area with poor infrastructure. These factors alone serve to deter attempts at access by the media. It certainly does not lend itself to in-out 'parachute' journalism, and a decision to cover the issue would require a significant allocation of resources and commitment on the part of a news editor. On top of this, the Sudanese government imposed stringent restrictions on access to the region early on in the conflict. Given the costs and risks, overcoming these access barriers would require the presence of other major factors that would give the conflict the perceived value necessary to justify such costs and risks.

There were also considerable barriers to the ability to identify and to sympathize with those associated with the conflict in Darfur. There was little to distinguish violence in Darfur from that in any number of other African hotspots, and partly because of this, very little information emerged in the first place. The few gatekeepers in the media industry who knew of the conflict reflexively assumed that potential audiences in the West would not relate to the victims of the violence in terms of race (black), religion (Muslim) or socio-economic status (poor), among other forms of identity. Furthermore, because the conflict was initially classified as being 'tribal violence' (*New York Times* 2003a), and because clearly distinguishing groups into the

roles of aggressor versus helpless victim was perceived as difficult, little sympathy for the victims could be anticipated. Darfur was simply another tragic African conflict, for which nothing could be done.

The conditions of simplicity and sensationalism were also (and could have easily continued to be) perceived as lacking. The parties to the conflict are not easily distinguishable: both sides are black, African, indigenous and Muslim. The simple dichotomy of an 'Arab' versus 'black' conflict which later came to define the perception of the conflict has no racial or historical basis, and is instead a relatively recent social construction that outside attention and attempts at simplification have ironically helped to entrench (De Waal 2005, 197). The origins and causes of the violence are not easily understood or simplified either (Lemarchand 2006, 1-12). Nor were there any particularly sensational or novel events that would serve to attract attention, such as urban terrorist bombings or sudden natural disasters.

The emergence of the label of genocide for the conflict certainly carries sensational overtones, but even so, it is often referred to as genocide in slow motion. Furthermore, as Alex de Waal (2005, 202) points out, 'Arab critics are correct in maintaining that if Darfur is genocide, then so is Congo, Burundi, Uganda, Nigeria and a host of others'. Before the conflict rose to prominence in Darfur, the label of genocide could have been conceivably (and arguably even more easily) applied to other conflicts. If guilt over failure to act in Rwanda (the 'never again Rwanda' factor) was such a powerful motivator in focusing attention on Darfur, then why was it not effective in evoking responses to conflict in the DRC, for example, where the Rwandan genocide is not simply a history to be remembered, but a very real source of continued violence today? Leaders associated with the genocide in Rwanda are still militarily active in the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) in the DRC, and it is the threat posed by this group that prompted Congolese General Laurent Nkunda to rebel from the army to continue fighting, constituting a major stumbling block to peace in that country.

Why did large-scale massacres and fighting between the Hema and Lendu groups that escalated in 2003 in the Ituri, DRC fail to sustain attention? At the time, a number of emotive newspaper articles (including a *New York Times* editorial) alarmingly called the massacres genocide (*New York Times* 2003b; *New York Sun* 2003), and even Nicholas Kristof (2003), who would soon turn his attention to Darfur, called it an 'African holocaust'. Media interest was briefly sparked, but it failed to hold, and much of the coverage ended up focusing on the small European intervention force.

When all of these factors are considered, there do not appear to be any particular distinguishing characteristics of the conflict in Darfur that would set it apart from (or above) a host of other conflicts in Africa, resulting in such greater levels of attention and a more resolute response.

6. Why Darfur was noticed

In terms of media attention, the conflict in Darfur was, up until early 2004, firmly on the path towards marginalization, a path very familiar to so many other devastating conflicts that occur in Africa. Considering the conflict in light of the inherent factors that can make the difference between a conflict being noticed and being ignored, it is not difficult to see why. Yet it became the object of a level of media coverage not experienced by any other African conflict for almost a decade. But why was the crisis in Darfur singled out for such selective indignation? How did it succeed in attracting attention where other more deadly conflicts failed? How were the barriers to attention for the conflict overcome?

As Figure 1 demonstrates, the turning point in media attention clearly occurred around March-April 2004. What changed? The ‘successful’ association of the conflict in Darfur with the Rwandan genocide leading up to, and on the occasion of, the latter event’s tenth anniversary appears to have been the major initial spark, or tipping point, that marked the beginning of high levels of attention to the conflict by the media. Of the 14 articles published by the *New York Times* in March and April 2004 on the conflict in Darfur, for example, 8 (57 percent) mention the Rwandan genocide – including a number of emotive op-ed pieces. The association with genocide stuck, and a bandwagon effect helped achieve an exponential growth in coverage.

The genocide connection also appears to have served from that point on as the fuel that sustained the attention the conflict received. Events associated with the issue of genocide coincided with most of the major spikes in media coverage, and the word appears consistently in media coverage beyond late March 2004 (Miles 2006, 258-260). More than 40 percent (67 of 158) of articles published on Darfur in the *New York Times* in the entire period studied include the word genocide. Although there has since been much criticism that the debate over genocide took the wind out of the sails of the actual response, it is important to remember that it was the notion of genocide that helped put Darfur on the agendas of those in a position to respond in the first place, and that it served to keep it there.

With these observations in mind, it is worth revisiting how the conflict in Darfur fared in 2004 against conditions for outside attention (national/political interest, proximity/access, ability to identify, ability to sympathize, simplicity and sensationalism). This can help us to understand how the barriers to attention were overcome, and why the genocide label stuck in Darfur where it had failed elsewhere.

US political interest in Darfur began to increase in 2004. Policymakers were still primarily concerned with achieving a north-south peace deal in Sudan (particularly considering the need for Christian votes in an election year), but speaking out against the escalating conflict in Darfur provided Washington with some leverage in that regard (as long as it didn’t derail a potential peace deal) (Huliaras 2006, 722; Heinze 2007). Washington publicly criticized the Sudanese government over Darfur, for example, when the government and the southern rebels ‘failed to conclude a “final deal” in time for US President George Bush’s State of the

Union address' in January 2004 (IISS 2004, 324). The need to deflect attention from mounting troubles from its actions in Iraq and Guantanamo (and repair its damaged reputation) may have also helped (IISS 2005, 2; Synovitz 2004; Totten 2006, 64).

Furthermore, as the associations between Darfur and genocide began to emerge, it was potentially damaging for President Bush not to respond in some way, having seen the damage done to the Clinton administration because of its refusal to accept the existence of genocide in Rwanda, and having famously penned the words 'not on my watch' on a memo about US government inaction over Rwanda. Bush stated in April 2004 on the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide that 'a new chapter of tragedy' had been opened in Darfur and condemned the 'brutalization' of the region (White House, 2004). US Secretary of State Colin Powell visited the region in June, and went on to announce that the situation constituted genocide (as did the US House of Representatives). The USA also led efforts in the UN Security Council to impose sanctions (or at least the threat thereof) on Sudan over the conflict in Darfur. The media was clearly receptive to such policy interest, as demonstrated by the fact that much of the coverage on Darfur remained focused on US policy responses to the conflict, rather than on the conflict itself (see also Kothari 2010, 6-11).

There was little change in terms of proximity/access or ability to identify in 2004. The conflict, of course, remained distant, remote and difficult to access in terms of infrastructure, and the victims were still black, Muslim and poor. One factor that did make a difference, however, was the agreement by the Sudanese Government in February 2004 to allow access to the area to aid workers, which served to increase the flow of information to a degree. In terms of changes in the ability to identify, it is interesting to note that as the conflict became increasingly represented as a genocide being committed by Arabs, the perceived 'Arab Muslim threat' did appear to serve as something that could be identified with in the USA, a point that was subtly emphasized by some sections of advocacy groups trying to draw attention to Darfur: focusing on the Arab Muslim threat and downplaying the fact that the victims were also Muslim (Eichler-Levine and Hicks 2007, 711-735).

Association with genocide can potentially give a major boost to the attention a conflict receives because it affects the ability to sympathize, simplicity and sensationalism. But this does not explain why the association stuck in the case of Darfur, as opposed to other cases. In a sense, it can be said that the barriers against sympathy, simplification and sensationalism were more easily overcome in the case of Darfur. The key to whether or not the victims of a particular conflict can attract sympathy lies in how blameless and helpless they appear. As was the case with the Albanian Kosovars, and the Zapatistas in Mexico (Bob 2005, 146-7), the weaker party (the rebel groups in Darfur) was able to attract sympathy by attacking and provoking the stronger party (the Sudanese Government) into making an excessive response (see also Crawford and Kuperman 2006). Both the ability to sympathize and simplicity were enhanced by the excessive response, which served to polarize the parties, and change the outside perception of the conflict from fighting caused by

‘tribal rivalry’, into genocide in which the ‘Arabs’ were bent on destroying the ‘blacks’ in the region. In terms of sensationalism, there were no particular events occurring within the conflict itself that enhanced this aspect of the conflict, but the guilt and reflection brought about by the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide gave this particular ‘genocide’ the sensationalism that it needed to push it into the spotlight.

Were these critical advantages over other conflicts and contenders for the label of genocide? In the case of the DRC, national/political interest proved to be a major barrier to attention. Rwanda and Uganda, who invaded and occupied the DRC, were close allies of the USA, and poster cases for the so-called ‘African renaissance’, as well as for the apparent success of the policies of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (Otunnu 2004, 49-50; Clark 2002, 7). Finally, guilt over inaction during the Rwandan genocide took away any credible moral authority to criticize Rwanda’s actions. From the perspective of national/political interest, the conflict in the DRC was best kept quiet.

In terms of proximity/access, the DRC was equally as disadvantaged as Darfur. In terms of the ability to identify, the perception of the Darfur conflict as Arab-versus-black made for a much smoother connection than the Ituri conflict, for example, with the Hema and Lendu ethnic groups all but unknown to the outside world. Both the ability to sympathize and the ability to simplify into a two-party morality play were severely compromised by the sheer complexity of the conflict as a whole. With the involvement of so many national militaries, rebel groups, warlords and militia, the conflict could not easily be explained or understood, and it was difficult to identify (or create the perception of) a particular blameless and helpless group – in the case of the Ituri conflict, both parties (Hema and Lendu) were seen as sharing blame (unlike in Darfur). This complexity may be one of the critical deciding factors in the low levels of attention that this conflict has received.

Nicholas Kristof, writing in his blog, justified his focus on Darfur as opposed to the DRC, despite being fully aware of the vastly greater scale of the latter, using similar criteria.

Congo is essentially a tale of chaos and poverty and civil war. Militias slaughter each other, but it’s not about an ethnic group in the government using its military force to kill other groups. And that is what Darfur has been about: An Arab government in Khartoum arming Arab militias to kill members of black African tribes. We all have within us a moral compass, and that is moved partly by the level of human suffering. ... But our compass is also moved by human evil, and that is greater in Darfur (Kristof 2007).

This justification is essentially about the ability to sympathize, simplicity and sensationalism. Contrary to the above assertion, a great deal of the conflict in the DRC was related to ethnicity – it is just that there were multiple groups. The DRC Government and the occupying Ugandan and Rwanda Governments also allied themselves with particular ethnic groups, resulting in numerous large-scale massacres of other ethnic groups –

it was just that there were multiple groups and multiple alliances. The conflict in the DRC is not ‘chaos’ (which reads as a licence not to attempt to understand), it is complex.

But appearances are important. While the conflict in Darfur was not nearly as simple as it has been portrayed, it was far more easily simplified than that in the DRC. Some observers noted with concern that the apparently increasing complexity of the conflict in Darfur threatened to rob it of its genocide label, and consequently the attention it was receiving, as groups splintered and as the conflict merged with related conflicts in neighbouring countries. Interestingly, the underlying fear was that the conflict ‘could easily become the next Congo’ (Polgreen 2006), degenerating ‘into a violence so fractious and multifaceted that even the most sympathetic of observers ... are paralyzed with frustration’ (Miles 2006, 261). That is, Darfur would cease to be our concern if it became too complex to easily comprehend and frame. It would appear that, in the case of foreign conflicts, the moral compass is moved by simplicity and ease of understanding (not the level of ‘human evil’), and that complexity is a key threat to this movement.

7. Conclusions

In April 2004, the conflict in Darfur was propelled from obscurity into a prominent and sustained position on the US media agenda – something very rarely seen in response to a conflict in Africa. As the above discussion suggests, this was the result of the convergence of a number of factors. National/political interest and domestic pressures within policymaking circles led the Bush administration to adjust its approach from limited and quiet diplomacy to limited activism. Heavily reliant on government sources and profit conscious, the media responded to this interest: ‘what carries a news story is not necessarily its truth or importance, but whether it is driven by dominant officials within institutional decision-making arenas’ (Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston, 2007, 29). The perception of policy interest, and the general surge of ‘never again’ guilt over the failure to stop genocide accompanying the tenth anniversary of Rwanda, which was enhanced by statements from the UN Coordinator in Sudan (followed by others) drawing parallels between Darfur and Rwanda, gave that conflict the boost it needed for the genocide label to stick. Without the genocide label, the conflict would have undoubtedly been written off as another African tragedy and ignored, regardless of what the death toll would eventually become.

The timing in this sense was critical. Would the conflict have taken off had it not coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide (or with the north-south peace process, or with US presidential elections, for that matter)? Would it have taken off if the USA had invaded Iraq in 2004 instead of 2003 (that is, when there was another major event dominating attention), or if the occupation of Iraq hadn’t been going so badly (meaning that a distraction was not required)? It is difficult to say for sure, but the timing of each of these factors undoubtedly served to push attention towards the conflict to its tipping point. Other African

candidates for the label of genocide did not have the benefit of this timing.

The conflict in Darfur also had some other advantages over other conflicts. With one side apparently much stronger than the other, it could be simplified more easily than others. Regardless of the levels of humanitarian suffering in the DRC, the complexity of the situation as a whole served to diffuse attention: it couldn't be made to fit neatly into a morality play format at a macro level, despite the presence of what could have been characterized as several separate morality plays. On some levels (most notably the ability to identify), the notion of the Arab Muslim as aggressor also gave an advantage to Darfur. Other far more deadly conflicts were also found lacking in terms of the ability to sympathize, simplicity and sensationalism, and the genocide label did not stick.

It is sad that, particularly in the case of Africa, the difference between a conflict becoming the subject of selective indignation and it being virtually ignored is largely determined by whether or not the genocide label can be made to stick, particularly when the 'determination' of the label appears subjective and selective. But it is not only the issue of genocide per se that was important in the case of Darfur: political interest was also a key factor, as were timing and the ease of simplification.

With so much conflict-related suffering in the world, selectivity is inevitable, and seemingly simple problems are easy targets. All of this begs the question: how genuinely humanitarian is supposedly humanitarian interest, when it fails to function in the absence of political interest, in the absence of a compelling frame, or in the face of complexity? The rise of attention to Darfur should be seen as a positive step in many ways: it has been a devastating conflict and remains in need of greater attention. But the same can be said for many other conflicts. The rarity of an African conflict attracting and holding the US media spotlight gives us the opportunity to explore the mechanisms governing the attention bestowed upon foreign conflicts. The opportunity should not be missed.

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