

Inside Darfur

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Jews have a special relationship with genocide – a haunting and deep attachment to the horrors of victimization. How has that experience influenced Jewish involvement in the anti-genocide movement? And what are the other factors at play as Jewish communities rally in record numbers against the Sudanese government's genocide in Darfur? The following pages explore Jewish responses to genocide and Israeli reactions to Darfuri refugees seeking asylum. We explore the nature and outcome of that activism and how we—as Jews—can draw on our history, our moral intelligence, and ethical teachings to fight a genocide that has unfolded before our eyes. I'd like to thank Or Rose, a member of the *Sh'ma* Advisory Board, for his guidance in framing the questions that animate this discussion, as well as the American Jewish World Service and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, who have generously provided sponsorship for this issue.

**Twenty-First-Century Genocide:
 The Imperative of a Jewish Response**

Ruth Messinger

After Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, South Sudan, and now Darfur, our lives could make a mockery of the sentiment often heard in the Jewish world, “never again.” Darfur is Rwanda in slow motion. For those of us who wondered what we were doing when 800,000 were slaughtered in 100 days, we now have a chance to respond. Today, we are in the midst of another genocide — the first to be labeled as such while it was occurring — and this one into its fifth year.

After the U.S. government named Darfur a genocide in 2004 but did nothing, a grassroots movement emerged with strong roots in the Jewish and other faith communities as well as in secular organizations. The Jewish community has responded across denominational lines — in synagogues and schools, at Holocaust memorials and interfaith services, in b'nai mitzvah celebrations, and at camps.

Jews are involved for many reasons but primarily because the violence in Darfur is genocide, and Jews know very well the dangers that occur when the international community remains silent in the face of genocide. There are undoubtedly some Jews involved because the Sudanese government and its Janjaweed militia are fundamentalist Muslims, intent on Arabizing a wide swath of Central Africa. Others may be involved because action on behalf of the Darfuri seems more clear-cut than making sense of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and figuring out what to do in the Middle East.

But most Jews are responding because they want to speak out against such horrors. As the anti-genocide movement continues to grow, the American Jewish World Service has disseminated materials, supported local activities, raised funds, and made it easy for people to act via its website — to write their elected officials, to urge pension-fund divestment from the Sudan-China oil trade, to attend D.C.



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Since 1998, Ruth Messinger has been President of American Jewish World Service, an international development organization representing the Jewish community in fighting global poverty through grants, service, education, and advocacy. A founder and board member of the Save Darfur Coalition, she has been speaking on this issue across the United States and has traveled to the region three times, most recently in August, 2007.

rallies, and to get involved in local efforts. It has raised over \$5 million for humanitarian aid for pumps, latrines, food, teachers, health clinics, and medical supplies, and has been central to the building of a large interfaith movement, the Save Darfur Coalition. Born in July 2004, at a meeting convened by AJWS and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Coalition has grown immensely; it now represents more than 180 groups and supports activism in American, European, and African communities against the Darfur genocide.

While some Jewish activists have asked AJWS if it is only Jews who care, and Sudan President Omar al-Bashir has said that a Jewish conspiracy is inventing the genocide story, the facts are otherwise. Anti-genocide voices include Catholic bishops, the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Council of Churches, student activists on campuses throughout the United States, and national leaders and opinion makers, especially the new president of France and the prime minister of Great Britain. What is immensely gratifying is that as the movement has grown, Jews continue to respond. We are visible as we ought to be, determined that the world not stand idly by.

There is much more to do. In nineteen states activism has led to divestment of state

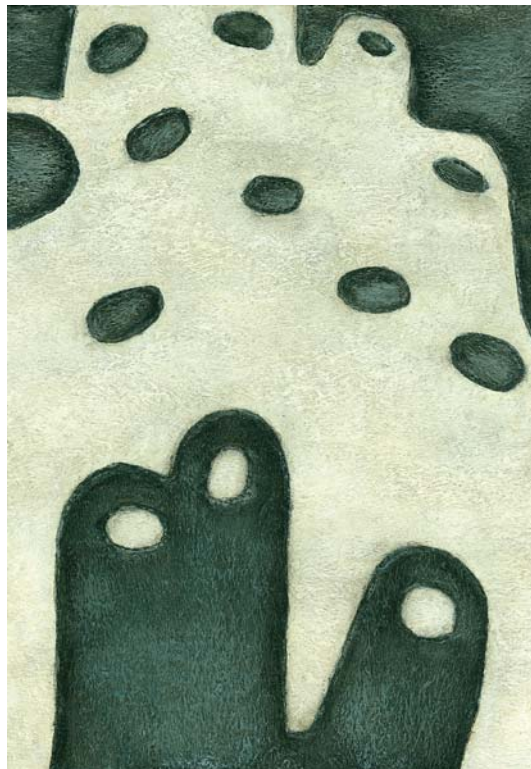
pension funds from the large multinational companies that sell Sudanese oil to China, thus giving Sudan money to buy armaments from China and Russia. Similar legislation is pending in other states, waiting for citizen activism to move legislators. A major effort has been launched to spotlight China's support for Sudan and demand that she instead use her relationship to insist that a robust, multilateral peacekeeping force be admitted into Darfur. The fact that China will host the 2008 Olympics is leverage to shame her into acting against this genocide.

In Darfur, today, there are still daily attacks on farmers and their villages. Government planes still drop bombs and a militia still rape women, kill children, and displace people from their homes. An estimated 450,000 are dead, more than 2.5 million displaced, 4.2 million in need of food. We, who know the danger of doing nothing, cannot retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed. As long as the genocide continues we must step up our individual activism, demand that our congregations and organizations do more, be sure that when our grandchildren ask us what we did to stop the genocide in Darfur, we each have an answer.

[Editor's Note: The number of Sudanese deaths differs among the contributors; because of the chaos and confusion on the ground, it is difficult to ascertain exact numbers — certainly several hundred thousand.]

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Resources on Darfur

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Savedarfur.org

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