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A Policy of Rape

By Nicholas D. Kristof, Op-Ed Columnist



Naka Nathaniel/NYTimes.com

[NYALA, Sudan] – All countries have rapes, of course. But here in the refugee shantytowns of Darfur, the horrific stories that young women whisper are not of random criminality but of a systematic campaign of rape to terrorize civilians and drive them from “Arab lands” – a policy of rape.

One measure of the international community’s hypocrisy is that the world is barely bothering to protest. More than two years after the genocide in Darfur began, the women of Kalma Camp – a teeming squatter’s camp of 110,000 people driven from their burned villages – still face the risk of gang rape every single day as they go out looking for firewood.

Nemat, a 21-year-old, told me that she left the camp with three friends to get firewood to cook with. In the early afternoon a group of men in uniforms caught and gang-raped her.

“They said, ‘You are black people. We want to wipe you out,’” Nemat recalled. After the attack, Nemat was too injured to walk, but her relatives found her and carried her back to camp on a donkey.

A neighbor, Toma, 34, said she heard similar comments from seven men in police uniforms who raped her. “They said, ‘We want to finish you people off,’” she recalled.

Sometimes the women simply vanish. A young mother named Asha cried as she told how she and her four sisters were chased down by a Janjaweed militia; she escaped but all her sisters were caught.

“To this day, I don’t know if they are alive or dead,” she sobbed. Then she acknowledged that she had another reason for grief: a Janjaweed militia had also murdered her husband 23 days earlier.

Gang rape is terrifying anywhere, but particularly so here. Women who are raped here are often ostracized for life, even forced to build their own huts and live by themselves. In addition, most girls in Darfur undergo an extreme form of genital cutting called infibulation that often ends with a midwife stitching the vagina shut with a thread made of wild thorns. This stitching and the scar tissue make sexual assault a particularly violent act, and the resulting injuries increase the risk of H.I.V. transmission.

Sudan has refused to allow aid groups to bring into Darfur more rape kits that include medication that reduces the risk of infection from H.I.V.

The government has also imprisoned rape victims who became pregnant, for adultery. Even those who simply seek medical help are harassed and humiliated.

On March 26, a 17-year-old student named Hawa went to a French-run clinic in Kalma and reported that she had been raped. A French midwife examined her and confirmed that she was bleeding and had been raped.

But an informer in the clinic alerted the police, who barged in and – over the determined protests of two Frenchwomen – carried Hawa off to a police hospital, where she was chained to a cot by one leg and one arm. A doctor there declared that she had not been raped after all, and Hawa was then imprisoned for a couple of days. The authorities are now proposing that she be charged with submitting false information.

The attacks are sometimes purely about humiliation. Some women are raped with sticks that tear apart their insides, leaving them constantly trickling urine. One Sudanese woman working for a European aid organization was raped with a bayonet.

Doctors Without Borders issued an excellent report in March noting that it alone treated almost 500 rapes in a four-and-a-half-month period. Sudan finally reacted to the report a few days ago – by arresting an Englishman and a Dutchman working for Doctors Without Borders.

Those women who spoke to me risked arrest and lifelong shame by telling their stories. Their courage should be an inspiration to us - and above all, to President Bush – to speak out. Mr. Bush finally let the word Darfur pass his lips on Wednesday, after 142 days of silence, but only during a photo op. Such silence amounts to acquiescence, for this policy of rape flourishes only because it is ignored.

I'm still chilled by the matter-of-fact explanation I received as to why it is women who collect firewood, even though they're the ones who are raped. The reason is an indication of how utterly we are failing the people of Darfur, two years into the first genocide of the 21st century.

“It's simple,” one woman here explained. “When the men go out, they're killed. The women are *only* raped.”

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