

Minnesota takes a stand against genocide

By Ellen J. Kennedy | Wednesday, Dec. 3, 2008

On July 23, 2004, the U.S. government declared the Darfur crisis to be genocide. Four years later, there is no end in sight. Nearly half a million innocent people have died and more than 2.5 million people have been displaced from their homes.

There is a growing outcry in Minnesota about this century's first genocide and the hollowness of the words "Never again" and "Never forget," uttered after the horrors of the Holocaust.

In Minnesota, the local has gone global. St. Paul, Edina, and Hopkins City Councils recently passed resolutions affirming that they have no investments in companies complicit with the genocide in Darfur, a region in the African country of Sudan.

Why should city officials get involved with a genocide happening 7,000 miles away? According to the resolution passed in Hopkins, "The city of Hopkins is concerned not only with the financial repercussions of investment in companies whose values will be negatively affected by their involvement with the genocide being waged by the Government of Sudan, but also with the moral implications of such financial arrangements. The citizens of the city of Hopkins do not want funds used to perpetrate terrorism and atrocities against civilians."

Divestments make a difference

In response to a growing student- and citizen-led movement, the University of Minnesota passed a divestment resolution in 2007 shortly before a Sudanese refugee spoke at a commencement ceremony. A month later, Gov. Tim Pawlenty signed into law a bill divesting Minnesota's \$30 billion pension fund from companies complicit with the genocide, as identified by the Sudan Divestment Task Force.

To date, 27 states, 61 colleges and universities, and 21 cities have said "No" to financial complicity with genocide.

Does this make a difference? We think it does. The government of Sudan is susceptible to economic pressure. The government of Sudan relies on foreign direct investment not only to pay its debts and subsidize government expenditures, but also to fund its military and finance the war in Darfur. In fact, a former Sudanese finance minister estimated that 70 percent of the government's share of oil profits is spent on the military.

Perceiving the divestment movement as a clear threat, the government of Sudan has taken significant steps to publicly oppose divestment, placing a \$1 million advertisement in the New York Times last spring extolling the virtues of investing in Sudan and issuing both a press release and an op-ed condemning the divestment movement. As Sudan researcher Eric Reeves

notes, "The fact that the regime is responding so distinctly to the movement means they certainly understand the implications."

In fight against genocide, each front counts

Minnesota is fighting genocide on several fronts.

Six Minnesota organizations, representing civic, educational and faith institutions, supported Twin Cities Public Television production of a 30-minute TV documentary about Darfur, to be broadcast many times throughout the state and made available electronically.

Many Minnesota schools, colleges, and universities are including education about genocide, and especially about the Darfur catastrophe, in their curriculum and in special events.

Bloomington and Edina sponsored citywide screenings of documentaries about Darfur and held discussions of what ordinary citizens could do to stop genocide.

Edina passed an anti-genocide resolution urging that the U.S. government safeguard the security of innocent men, women and children in Darfur. This resolution said, "We, the legislators of the city of Edina, Minnesota, acknowledge the moral imperative of the right to protect all citizens from atrocity crimes; this reflects the highest values of freedom, care, and preservation of the lives of innocent civilians. The citizens of the City of Edina, Minnesota elect Members of Congress and, with other citizens, the President and Vice-President of the United States. We believe that these officials have a responsibility to use every legal means to protect people from atrocity crimes wherever those crimes occur." The resolution urged global leaders to develop nonunilateral, nonviolent strategies to implement the responsibility to protect.

Edina joined two other cities in the nation that have passed anti-genocide resolutions: Chicago and San Francisco.

Important reasons to care

Why should we care? For most of us, Sudan is a place we'll never visit. We may not even know where it is. And we probably don't know any Sudanese people. But there are important reasons to care.

The Torah, the Bible and the Koran all exhort us not to stand by when the blood of our neighbor is spilled. This moral imperative compels us to stand up for all human beings.

Impunity allows evil to flourish. Adolf Hitler said to his generals, on the eve of sending his death squads into Poland, "Go, kill without mercy ... who today remembers the annihilation of the Armenians?" If we let extermination go unchecked, it will devastate one innocent group after another.

The United States has signed and ratified the Genocide Convention. It's the law of our land and we have a legal responsibility to prevent and stop genocide.

It's economically sound to prevent genocide. According to the Carnegie Commission on

Preventing Deadly Conflict, the international community spent \$200 billion on seven major interventions in the 1990s, including the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda. We could have saved more than \$130 billion through a more effective preventive approach.

Genocide breeds insecurity in the region, the continent and the world. President Bush declared, in April 2006, "I find that an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States is posed by the persistence of violence in Sudan's Darfur region."

'What we need isn't more bandages'

Two years ago, New York Times reporter Nicholas Kristof observed during a trip through Darfur and the neighboring country of Chad that "after more than three years of brutality, it seems incredibly inadequate for the international community simply to hand out bandages when old women are roasted in their huts and young men have their eyes gouged out. What we need isn't more bandages, but the will to stand up to genocide."

When we see an accident, we call 911. When we know about genocide, we should take a similar step. There is an anti-genocide hotline, 1-800-GENOCIDE that automatically connects all Americans to their representatives, senators, and the White House. We can all contact our elected officials and demand that the century's first genocide be stopped.

Minnesotans are standing up. Hopkins, Edina, St. Paul — every single Minnesota municipality should divest. Every Minnesota college and university should divest. Every Minnesota city should pass anti-genocide resolutions. Every Minnesota teacher should include this catastrophe in the curriculum. And every single Minnesotan should call the anti-genocide hotline.

For most of us, this time of year is a time of great joy; we have just given thanks for our family, friends, safety, warmth, health and security. The people of Darfur have none of these blessings. We must end this genocide and prevent others from happening — and we must do it now. Our humanity demands it of us.

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