

It's the Tenth Anniversary of When the Media Declared "Genocide" in Darfur UN Dispatch
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Ed note

. The data in this post come from an old study I conducted using LexisNexis search terms. I revisit the data today, which is the 10 year anniversary of the media's awakening to the Darfur crisis.□

Today marks the first time a major American newspaper published an article about a potential genocide in Darfur.

[In a February 25, 2004
Washington Post
op-ed](#)

titled "Un-noticed Genocide," Eric Reeves, a Sudan activist and professor of English literature at Smith College, described horrific scenes of the conflict in Darfur and concluded, "There can be no reasonable skepticism about Khartoum's use of [the janjaweed] to "destroy, in whole or in part, ethnic or racial groups" — in short, to commit genocide."

This was the first mention of "Darfur" and "genocide" in the same breath. Between that date and a September 9, 2004 Senate hearing in which then-Secretary of State Colin Powell testified that the State Department has evidence of on-genocide in Darfur, the

New York Times

ran a total of 68 items mentioning "Darfur" and "genocide." Of these 68 items, 29 came from news desks. The other 39 items appeared on opinion pages.

The Washington Post

mentioned Darfur and genocide a total of 67 times, 27 of which from news desks and 40 from the opinion pages.

One month of media silence followed Reeves' February 15 op-ed, until

New York Times

columnist Nicholas Kristof travelled to the region. Kristof led a March 25, column (date-lined "along the Chad-Sudan border") with, "The most vicious ethnic cleansing you've never heard of is unfolding here in the southeastern fringes of the Sahara Desert. It's a campaign of murder, rape and pillage by Sudan's Arab rulers that has forced 700,000 black African Sudanese to flee their villages." In his next column, two days later, Kristof revised his description of the situation from "ethnic cleansing" to "genocide." "In my last column, I called these actions "ethnic cleansing," wrote Kristof. "But let's be blunt: Sudan's behavior also easily meets the definition of

genocide in Article 2 of the 1948 convention against genocide. That convention not only authorizes but also obligates the nations ratifying it — including the U.S. — to stand up to genocide.”

With 10 subsequent columns written about Darfur in the prescribed time period Kristof emerged as the media's leading voice on Darfur. He would not equivocate from his view that Darfur was a “genocide.” He used phrases like “a kaleidoscope of genocide” and “Sudan's final solution” to drive this point home. In a particularly telling column, titled “Dare We Call it Genocide?”, Kristof described his encounters with some victims and concluded, “if she and her people aren't victims of genocide, then the word has no meaning.”

Beyond Kristof, the editorial pages of the two papers played a leading role in advancing the narrative of genocide in Darfur. An unsigned editorial in

The Washington Post

on April 3 did not use the term genocide to outright describe Darfur, but did call the conflict, “a horrific campaign of ethnic cleansing.”

The editorial did, however, peg off of the 10-year anniversary of the April 1994 Rwandan genocide so the message was clear. The

New York Times

similarly used that peg for an unsigned editorial on April 7 that raised the specter of “another Rwanda,” but declined to outright describe Darfur as a “genocide.” Subsequent unsigned editorials from both papers would forthrightly call the conflict a “genocide.”

(...)

News Desks Take Notice

The news desks of the

Washington Post

and the

New York Times

were comparatively slow to pick up on the Darfur story. After three columns from Kristof, two editorials and one op-ed from an outside contributor, the

New York Times

ran its first piece on Darfur and genocide

not

to appear on the editorial page on April 8. The brief article, from the

Times'

foreign desk, reported on a written statement from President Bush and remarks from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan regarding the situation in Darfur. It took nearly one additional month for

The Washington Post

to publish its first item on Darfur and genocide outside of the opinion pages. On May 6, UN reporter Colum Lynch wrote an item about a new Human Rights Watch report that alleged "ethnic cleansing" in Darfur. As was the case with the

New York Times

, a total of six opinion pieces preceded the paper's first news article on Darfur.

(...)

Why this matters

If you want people to pay attention to an atrocity unfolding in a forlorn part of the world, "genocide" will catch people's attention in a way that "mass killing" would not. We are seeing this dynamic unfolding right now in the Central African Republic, which is descending into ethnic violence. It was not until French and UN officials started warning of a potential genocide that the international community kicked into gear and started to take action. Earlier this month, the

New York Times

invoked the specter of "genocide" in an editorial about CAR.

Genocide, though, has a very specific definition: it does not mean mass killing. It means mass killing with an intent to destroy a population based on ethnicity or race. In other words, the intention of the perpetrators is to eradicate a population because of who they are, not what militia they support or their political affiliation.

Darfur was invisible to most Americans — even those of us who follow foreign affairs — until 10 years ago today. Invoking "genocide" caught our attention. It was how a civil war in a desolate part of the world became a household name in the USA. It was how a large social movement with a diverse constituency coalesced to "Save Darfur." It was how Darfur became a priority for George Bush's State Department, even in the midst of two failing wars. (For a book length discussion of how the Save Darfur movement affected US policy read

[*Fighting for Darfur*](#)

by Rebecca Hamilton).

Let me be clear: I believe what happened in Darfur was a "genocide." Among other things, I base this conclusion on evidence gathered by the State Department from interviews with Darfur refugees in Chad. The International Criminal Court prosecutor also believed there was enough evidence to issue an indictment for genocide, which he did in 2005. That opinion is dominant, but it is not universal: a January 2005

[UN Commission of Inquiry report](#)

did not substantiate claims of genocide.

Regardless of how you come down on this question, it is clear that "genocide" became a rallying point. Without "genocide" Darfur would probably still be invisible to most Americans. This is a problem.

We need to get to the point where invoking "genocide" is not a necessary condition to wake Americans and policymakers to a mass atrocity unfolding. It should not be a crutch, invoked to drive attention or resources to a crisis. The severity of the crisis is what should motivate people and policy makers, "genocide" or not.

(...)

Read
[full article](#)