

Reflections on the early disarray in Darfur

by Larry Minear

How has the international community acquitted itself since the beginnings of orchestrated violence in Darfur in early 2003? Why did it take so long to gear up and why were humanitarians so unequal to the challenges posed by the crisis?

Analysis of six evaluations provided by member agencies of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) of their own performance helps provide some answers.¹ Reviewing the six evaluations I was struck by the pervasive sense of frustration and failure. No agency viewed its own response or that of the system as adequate.

The slowness of the international response casts doubts on the capacity of the humanitarian system to deliver effective protection and assistance in major high-profile emergencies. It took some 12 to 18 months from the outbreak of the crisis in early 2003 for humanitarian operations to become firmly established. Programmes were slow off the mark due to the size and remoteness of Darfur, the delicate state of North-South peace negotiations, competition from higher profile emergencies elsewhere and, most significantly, access barriers created by the government of Sudan. As the number of the accessible population in need rose, agencies found themselves running to catch up, or even to stay in place. Aid was concentrated in areas under government control.

One positive development was that, from the outset of the crisis, agencies – energised by concern about violence against women – highlighted the need to prioritise protection. Médecins Sans Frontières-Holland noted that violence rather than malnutrition or ill health was the “overwhelming cause of death.” That said, there was much confusion regarding responsibility for providing protection. The UNICEF study noted

that “no UN agency has a clear protection mandate for IDPs” and in mid 2004 the UNHCR evaluators reported that there was “no consistent protection strategy” in and around refugee camps in Chad.

The experience of countless other crises was repeated in the Darfur response. The OCHA-led study commented on the “unsatisfactory performance” of a number of UN agencies and the “relatively small proportion of the NGOs [that are] regarded as effective in terms of their expertise and ability to take advantage of humanitarian access and fill gaps in challenging settings.” Another study commented on the high percentage among its Darfur staff of first-missioners lacking previous field experience. Still another noted that the Darfur response typified the positive “shift in focus in the activity of ‘humanitarian’ agencies from delivery to human rights and protection advocacy.” Aid workers today, it suggested, would rather talk to the Security Council than dig latrines.

The higher priority given to advocacy, however, did not produce the necessary reinforcing action on the political, diplomatic and military fronts. Even on the highly sensitive issue of genocide, parallels to the Rwanda experience drawn by humanitarian and human rights groups generated only limited momentum. In fact, the effort at aid agency headquarters to label what was taking place as genocide was viewed by some colleagues in the field as complicating their sensitive day-to-day work. Certainly the Sudanese authorities reacted negatively to the genocide debate,

viewing it as part of a wider anti-Sudan, anti-Muslim campaign. As someone who has been involved in Sudan issues off and on since my initial posting there in 1972, I was struck by the a-historicity of the approach taken by the agencies to the Darfur challenge. Lessons from the Sudan itself and from other theatres have gone largely unrecognised. One of the UN studies expressed surprise at problems which should have been familiar from other contexts: siting of camps too close to the border, difficulties in enumeration of the refugee population, the need to protect women gathering firewood and problems related to decentralisation of decision making and staff morale.

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The evaluations led me to offer the conjecture that after thirty years of high-profile international humanitarian initiatives in the Sudan, the belligerents have done a better job of learning how to manipulate and frustrate humanitarian action than the international community has of using its considerable assets creatively.

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This article is based on a presentation made to the 18th ALNAP Biannual Meeting in December 2005, online at: www.odi.org.uk/alnap/meetings/pdfs/LMinear_darfur_dec05.pdf. The full text of the analysis is a chapter in ALNAP’s Review of Humanitarian Action in 2004, www.alnap.org/RHA2004/pdfs/rha04_Ch3.pdf

1. The evaluations were an interagency study led by OCHA and individual studies by UNHCR, Oxfam, CARE, MSF Holland and UNICEF/DFID.