

The Women of Darfur: “The world failed to deliver on ‘never again’. Now allow us to go home”

The world failed to stop another Rwanda in Darfur: but now the winner of a prestigious women’s rights award, the RAW in WAR (Reach All Women in WAR) 2010 Anna Politkovskaya Award, asks “will the world ever allow us home?”

By Halima Bashir

There are many crises in the world today: wars, starvation, natural disasters like Tsunamis and flooding. But my own life is testimony to the one conflict that has caused more death and suffering than any other today, but which seems to go so unnoticed and unreported - Darfur.

After the Rwanda genocide the world pledged that “never again” would it stand by as innocents were killed in the hundreds of thousands. Sadly, for too long the world did just that in Darfur. No one knows how many have been killed - but the numbers run into the hundreds of thousands. Men, women and children. Unarmed. Innocent. Defenseless.

Each death is an individual - each of those people a human being with hopes and fears and dreams just like my own. Amidst the chaos and the bloodshed, some four million people have been driven from our homeland, Darfur. They are forced to live in refugee camps, which are places of a hopeless frustration and despair.

Even there, even today, some six years after the genocide by attrition began, they are still not safe or secure. Those camps are attacked; women are raped; children are kidnapped - and so the world community still cannot exert itself to protect the people - especially the women - of Darfur.

Today, there is a peacekeeping force on the ground in Darfur. However, the UNAMID force is woefully undermanned and under-equipped, and ill-prepared to defend the huge numbers of vulnerable civilians that it is tasked to protect. Peacekeepers have been killed by the Sudan government forces, their allied militias like the murderous Janjaweed, and by lawless rebel groups. The UNAMID force is trying to do a job for which it is hopelessly ill-suited, with a woeful lack of support from developed nations.

In short, for the millions of refugees the prospect of going home - because, remember, for all of us Darfur is our home - is a distant dream. Our land is there. Our burned out villages are there, awaiting us to return and rebuild them. Our orchards are there, our forests for gathering firewood, and the graveyards of our ancestors - yet there is no security to allow us to go home. Every single one of those people in the refugee camps just wants to go home to live in peace and

security, and with dignity, and to rebuild their lives.

We know that the world turned its face away when it could have made that phrase 'never again' really mean something for the people of Darfur. We are angry and feel let down, but we have no choice but to accept that failure. Now we ask that we be given the peace and security simply to allow us to return to our homes. To go home.

If the world could not guarantee 'never again' in Darfur, will it now at least find the resources and capacity and the collective will to guarantee four million Darfuris the right to go home?

We know that time is running out. As our people languish in refugee camps, we know that the Khartoum regime is resettling its allies - the tribes that made up the murderous Janjaweed militias; the devil horsemen - on our most fertile land and in our most well-watered villages. The longer this continues, the less chance we have of ever returning home - for our land will be occupied by those who killed our fathers and raped our children before our very eyes.

The world failed to guarantee 'never again', but can it not at least guarantee us a homeland to return to?

Some five years ago I saw the waves of devil horsemen riding into my village. I heard their cries as they taunted us, calling us 'black dogs and slaves'. I heard them scream out that they would kill us; kill us all. I fled, but my father stayed to fight, and he was killed, as were so many of the brave men in my village. They faced Kalashnikov assault rifles and helicopter gunships with little more than daggers and spears, and the odd, ancient hunting rifle. They stayed to buy us women and children the time to escape, so that we might live another day.

Yet today, four million languish in the refugee camps and cannot return home.

As a trained medical doctor, I treated the victims of the child rapes in Darfur. Imagine it. Imagine a country where grown men and leaders drew up a policy of child rape as a weapon of waging war. This is what happened in my country. The world failed to stop the horror, and still the refugee camps are not secure.

I've seen the pictures the children as young as five years old draw today of the horror, the memories and the trauma burned deep into their minds. I've heard their tears and their stories, and their screams at night as they dream the darkest of nightmares. The least those children deserve is to be allowed home - home so their mothers and sisters can rebuild their lives in a loving peaceful family.

And the least every Darfuri deserves is justice. The International Criminal Court has indicted the President of Sudan, and others, for war crimes in Darfur. The move has been criticized by some as inflaming the conflict in Darfur, but there was little that could make it worse for us, for the survivors.

And like all victims of an unspeakable horror - a genocide by rape, mass murder and starvation - we crave justice and a reckoning. We dream of the day that the masterminds of the horror face punishment for their crimes. For us, for we Darfuri victims, there can be no real homecoming, or closure, without such justice being done.

Imagine if a force of gunmen rode into your village, and gunned down the inhabitants simply because their skin colour was different from your own. Imagine if they killed your father and raped your children, and left your home a scorched and burning ruin. And imagine if their hatred and their blind prejudice forced you to flee from your own land - the land where your family and your ancestors had lived for centuries.

Imagine then how you would feel. That is how I feel. It is how every Darfuri woman and child feels. It is the feeling of the entire people of Darfur.

The world failed to deliver on 'never again'. All we ask for now is the right to go home, in peace and freedom, and for justice to be done. Is it too much to ask? I hope not. Every day I pray and I dream that we are given these two things.

I escaped to the UK, where I can speak freely about what happened. Three years ago I wrote a book telling my life story, called Tears of the Desert. When the British journalist approached me and suggested I speak out, I wondered who might be interested? My story was like that of the hundreds of thousands of other Darfuri women who suffered unspeakable war crimes.

Who would be interested? What difference would one voice, one story, one cry in the darkness make? Yet the reaction to me telling my story in that book proved to me what an enormous difference one voice can make.

As I receive the award that honours the memory of Anna Politkovskaya, who spoke up on behalf of the voiceless people in Chechnya, I am inspired and I know - mine is a voice for the millions of others; I'm speaking because they cannot speak, locked away in the refugee camps as they are. I hope my one voice, my one cry, my one small story can make a difference for all the people of Darfur.

And if the world community is listening, allow the people of Darfur this one thing: to leave the horrible limbo of the refugee camps and to return to our homes.