

Let's do the right thing right in Darfur

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Paul Martin can prove the cynics wrong. Many presumed that the Prime Minister's decision to upgrade our assistance to Darfur, made in the midst of a parliamentary imbroglio, was less about the survival of some of the most wretched people on Earth than about the survival of his government. But Mr. Martin has energetically endorsed the idea of a "Responsibility to Protect," a made-in-Canada norm gaining wide acceptance abroad, which holds that when governments cannot or will not protect their citizens, the international community has a responsibility to do so. The Prime Minister is doing the right thing in Darfur, but to lead the international community, and to prove the cynics wrong, it will take more than money, impressive though Canadian generosity is.

To do the right thing right, Canada is going to have to field a battalion or two of boots-on-the-ground soldiers, not just a platoon or two of logistics support. To do so, Mr. Martin will have to overcome resistance in several quarters. The Canadian Forces have all but stopped participating in United Nations military missions. Just last month, Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier, the Chief of the Defence Staff, was quoted as saying that after a necessary period of rehabilitation and rebuilding, the forces could soon carry out an increased level of operations, and by winter they could field 1,500 soldiers. Mr. Martin is going to have to ask DND to step up a little earlier than planned.

To do the right thing right, Mr. Martin will also have to override the gnomes at the Finance Department. If DND is going to deploy a proper force, doing so will cost extra money. Mr. Martin has twisted Finance's collective arm for increased domestic spending, while reassuring people that the fiscal framework can afford it. It is time to twist Finance's arm a little harder. And, while he is at it, Mr. Martin could direct a small fraction of the money to Foreign Affairs, so that Canada can enhance its eyes and ears on the ground in Sudan.

Mr. Martin will also have to surmount the obstacles presented by the Sudanese government and the African Union (AU). The Sudanese do not want capable foreign forces operating on their territory -- no surprise there. The AU insists on doing the job itself and resists the help of non-African forces. The AU's determination would be admirable and highly encouraging if it was getting the job done. But the AU has neither the numbers, nor the equipment, nor the training to succeed. African governments cannot have it both ways, decrying the world's abandonment of Rwanda but eschewing assistance in Darfur. Crimes against humanity are everyone's business.

Nor should Mr. Martin expect the permanent members of the Security Council to applaud him. The U.S. wants Sudanese intelligence in its war against terror. Further, the Americans claim to be unable to help stop the crimes in Darfur, which they themselves have proclaimed a genocide, because of overstretch in Iraq and Afghanistan. China has its own interests to protect, notably oil interests. Russia is likely willing to fight to the last Darfurian to safeguard the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, as if the displacement of millions of people were exclusively an internal affair. Meanwhile, NATO and the EU seem content to hold others' coats.

What is needed now is for Mr. Martin to challenge the international community, particularly its richest states, to do the right thing right.

Here's how: He could authorize Canada's ambassador to the UN, Allan Rock, who has been a rare leader on this issue at the UN, to make the Security Council an offer it will find hard to ignore. Let Mr. Rock ask for an open meeting of the council to assist the people of Darfur. Let him offer 1,500 Canadian troops, with all the gear they require. Let him challenge Western and other countries with capable military forces

to help the AU not hide behind it. And let him challenge the Africans to put the protection of people before the protection of pride, and co-operate in the creation of a larger force. To underline his point, let him be accompanied to the Security Council table by one of the countless survivors of Darfur who have lost everyone and everything dear to them.

No one is sure just how many people have died in Darfur in the 18 months since the region was declared a humanitarian crisis. Current estimates of the monthly death toll in Darfur are as high as 10,000. Compared to Rwanda, where 800,000 were killed in four months, Darfur is unfolding in slow-motion.

It is late, but not too late, for Canada to make a difference to those still surviving in Darfur.

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