

The Committee On Conscience At The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Rwanda And Darfur

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It has been said that "conscience whispers while interest screams aloud." In a world where the clamor of interests often prevails, the Committee seeks to amplify the voice of conscience.

When the President's Commission on the Holocaust recommended the creation of a living memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, it observed that no issue "was as perplexing or as urgent as the need to insure that such a totally inhuman assault as the Holocaust – or any partial version thereof – never recurs." To address that need, the President's Commission recommended creation of a Committee on Conscience, which the United States Holocaust Memorial Council unanimously approved shortly after the Museum opened. The present Chair of the Committee is Tom Bernstein; the Staff Director is Jerry Fowler.

The Committee on Conscience mandate is to alert the national conscience, influence policy makers, and stimulate worldwide action to confront and work to halt acts of genocide or related crimes against humanity. In carrying out its mandate, the Committee uses a wide range of actions, including public programs and activities, temporary exhibitions and public or private communications with policy makers. It seeks to work whenever possible with other governmental and non-governmental organizations. The Holocaust Memorial Council directed the Committee on Conscience to base its work on the definition of genocide found in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide approved by the United Nations in 1948 and ratified by the United States in 1988:

[G]enocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: Killing members of the group; Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Most countries in the world, including the United States, are parties to the Convention, obligating themselves to "undertake to prevent and to punish" the crime.

RWANDA

In April 1994, extremist leaders of Rwanda's Hutu majority launched a campaign of extermination against the country's Tutsi minority. In 100 days, as many as 800,000 people were murdered and hundreds of thousands of women were raped. The Committee on Conscience continues to highlight the Rwandan genocide because of the:

Profound nature and scope of the violence

Continued impact of the genocide on the entire Central African region

Lessons Rwanda offers for responding to contemporary genocide

The genocide ended in July 1994, when the Rwandan Patriotic Front, a Tutsi-led rebel force, pushed the extremists and their genocidal interim government out of the country. The consequences of the genocide continue to be felt. It left Rwanda devastated, hundreds of thousands of survivors traumatized, the country's infrastructure in ruins, and over 100,000 accused perpetrators imprisoned. Justice and accountability, unity and reconciliation remain elusive.

SUDAN/ DARFUR

Tens of thousands of civilians have been murdered and thousands of women raped in Sudan's western region of Darfur by Sudanese government soldiers and members of the government-supported militia sometimes referred to as the Janjaweed. About 2 million civilians have been driven from their homes, their villages torched and their property stolen by the Sudanese military and the Janjaweed. Some of the victims have escaped to neighboring country of Chad, but most are trapped inside Darfur. Thousands die each month from the effects of inadequate food, water, health care, and shelter in a harsh desert environment. All are afraid to return home because the countryside is not safe.

The ethnic and perceived racial basis of the violence has been documented by the U.S. Department of State, the United Nations, independent human rights organizations, and international journalists. The Sudanese government primarily has targeted the civilian population of the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masaalit ethnic groups, sometimes referred to as "Africans."

The government's Janjaweed allies are drawn from some of Darfur's "Arab" tribes.

Sudan's Khartoum-based government is fueling ethnic and racial violence by using the Janjaweed militia as proxies against Darfur insurgents who launched a rebellion in early 2003. But it is civilians who are suffering. Government-sponsored actions include:

INFLAMING ethnic conflict

IMPEDING international humanitarian access, resulting in deadly conditions of life for displaced civilians

BOMBING civilian targets with aircraft

MURDERING and RAPING civilians

The death toll exceeds 100,000 and may be more than 400,000. And the crisis continues—the lives of hundreds of thousands more hang in the balance today.

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