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Activists strive to bring attention back to Darfur crisis

Chris Herlinger | Feb. 15, 2014
New York

Editor's note: The following is Part 1 of a two-part series on decade-long humanitarian efforts in Sudan, a country plagued by war and other crises.The next part will focus on efforts in South Sudan[1].

Mukesh Kapila is as blunt as he is passionate.

Speaking to a group of Sudanese living in New York City, he urged them not to give up on pressuring the Sudanese government to end, after a decade, what he and others have called its genocidal policies in the province of Darfur.

"A lot of good ideas have come from diaspora and you can do a lot of good," Kapila said. "But are you doing enough? Are you doing enough?"

He added, his voice rising, "You, the Sudanese people, have a responsibility to your brothers and sisters in Darfur. It can't be Oxfam [the humanitarian group] or the U.N. They can only do small things."

Kapila, speaking to a few dozen Sudanese at an event sponsored by the Darfur People's Association of New York, knows from personal experience these questions can become vexing.

An India-born U.K. citizen and a former diplomat whose stints include assignments with the United Nations in Sudan, Kapila has penned a memoir of his experiences in Darfur that he acknowledges is a "strident cri de coeur" and a "deeply personal account" of the early years of the unfolding Darfur crisis, which began in 2003.

The hallmark of his book, *Against a Tide of Evil: How One Man Became the Whistleblower to the First Mass Murder of the Twenty-First Century*, is his argument that the world was indifferent to the plight of Darfur, despite early -- and passionate -- warnings from Kapila (working for the U.N. at the time) and others about what was afoot there. The book does not spare the U.N. or other international groups from scathing criticism.

In a sort of preview of the book for his audience, meeting last October in Brooklyn, Kapila, who now teaches at the University of Manchester in England, stressed that, a decade after the events began, the Darfur crisis is far from over, despite attempts by the Sudanese government to minimize what has happened.

Niemat Ahmadi, president and founder of the Washington-based Darfur Women Action Group, was in the audience. She said later she could not agree more with Kapila.

"The situation in Darfur is really, really dire, and it's worsening every day," she said, citing recent reports of mass shootings, killings and systematic violence against women.

A statement on the website of the Sudanese Embassy in Washington said its government is committed to a peace settlement in Darfur. It also states the Sudanese government's belief that the Darfur crisis has been "manipulated and overblown by the media."

That, of course, doesn't surprise Kapila and others. "[Sudanese President Omar] al-Bashir wants to present the

whole thing has gone away ... after so many years of advocacy," Kapila said. He was referring not only to action by the Sudanese diaspora but the remarkable advocacy coalitions -- many of them driven by partnerships between Christians, Jews and Muslims -- that, for a time, raised the profile of a little-known and marginalized region in western Sudan.

These energized activists launched a movement that put the issue of genocide front and center for the world to consider, along the way garnering support from celebrities like George Clooney, Brad Pitt and Matt Damon.

That may have been the movement's greatest success -- as well as drawing attention to a situation that ultimately resulted in the 2008 indictment of al-Bashir by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity, the first time a sitting head of state was so charged.

But activists in the United States acknowledge that their work is far from over. "Justice is always costly and peace is always fragile, but both are worth working for," said activist Peggy Harris, a deacon in the Episcopal church who also assists in the resettlement of Sudanese refugees by working with Catholic Charities in Des Moines, Iowa.

Sharon Silber, active in the New York Coalition for Darfur and all Sudan, formerly the New York City Coalition for Darfur, agreed. "We're not going to abandon the issue even though it is frustrating work," she said, acknowledging that a decade-long commitment of activism has not always been easy to sustain. Yet, she said, it does continue for her and others, with regular demonstrations and vigils outside the Sudanese Consulate in New York and the U.S. Mission to the United Nations.

Harris and Silber acknowledge the difficulties they and other activists face, given the intractable nature of the conflict, which in the last year has been overshadowed by events in the border state areas of South Kordofan and Blue Nile and, more recently, by a political crisis in South Sudan. Southern Sudanese fought against the government of Sudan in a two-decade conflict that killed millions. South Sudan, as the new nation is called, was granted independence in 2011.

Activists are also fighting donor fatigue and the not-unexpected cycle of their fellows coming and going. "It's like a dance -- you move in and you move out," Harris said of fellow activists, acknowledging that "it's been tough" at times. Yet, core groups of people in their respective cities of New York and Des Moines keep the issue alive, Silber and Harris say. "We keep getting pushed to the back row. But activists keep climbing on the chairs to get attention," Harris said.

A key reason? The ongoing nature of the crisis, with reports of continued armed attacks and violence against civilians by the so-called Janjaweed militias, as well as increasing hunger and malnutrition throughout Darfur.

The recent violence, the activists argue, is the latest in a decade-plus conflict that has uprooted millions and has caused deaths that are estimated in the tens of thousands to the hundreds of thousands, from both direct violence and from illness or malnutrition. The displaced say they are victims of government-led efforts to drive them from their farms and villages, a charge the Sudanese government denies.

"Just because the international community is not focused on Darfur doesn't mean there is peace in Darfur," said Ahmed Adam, a visiting scholar at Columbia University in New York and a co-chair of its Two Sudans Project. He is also a former spokesman for the Justice and Equality Movement, known as JEM, one of the armed opposition groups that have been engaged with now-stalled peace negotiations with the Sudanese government.

In a statement summarizing recent events, the International Crisis Group, an independent advocacy and study organization committed to preventing and resolving deadly conflicts, said in January that violence in the region "spiked in 2013, as the mostly Arab militias initially armed by the government to contain the rebellion

increasingly escaped [Sudanese capital] Khartoum's control and fought each other."

Recent fighting, the group said, "displaced nearly half a million additional civilians -- in all 3.2 million Darfurians need humanitarian help."

Carolyn Fanelli, Sudan country representative for Catholic Relief Services, confirmed the continuing depths of the problems. She told *NCR* the humanitarian situation worsened in 2013, largely due to new displacements of people in several parts of the region.

"Humanitarian actors, including CRS, have responded in the areas where we can reach, and we all hope and pray for an improving situation in 2014," she said. At the same time, Fanelli said, the operating environment in Darfur "is becoming increasingly complex."

She added: "The nature of the conflict in Darfur is changing -- in particular, there is now more intertribal conflict -- and this makes it a much more unpredictable landscape for humanitarian actors."

Another factor in the situation: the international landscape. "There have been so many new emergencies in the world since the Darfur crisis first grabbed headlines in 2003 and 2004 -- Haiti, Japan, Syria, the Philippines," Fanelli said. "It is very easy to forget about Darfur or to throw up our hands in frustration that humanitarian assistance is still needed more than 10 years after the conflict began."

That is a humanitarian perspective. From the related but different focus on human rights, the view can be even more frustrating. To a person, activists interviewed said they have been profoundly disappointed by what they see as Darfur's de-emphasis by both President Barack Obama and Samantha Power, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

The activists' disappointment is keen. Power is a onetime Harvard professor and journalist who reported from Darfur. Her book *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* was a widely respected study that became a guiding text for activists involved in Darfur-related work.

"That book was a huge influence on activists and [Power] became a role model for them," said Ahmadi, who acknowledged that the roles of author and government leader differ.

But, she said, government leaders are judged by what they do -- and while Syria, for example, has consumed much attention, Darfur has apparently slid from sight on the U.S. agenda, with the Obama administration placing too much emphasis on engagement with the Sudanese government, Ahmadi argues. "When you're in government, you have the power to do certain things," she said. From the perspective of activists, she said, the Obama administration "has not done enough."

"We need to be tightening sanctions," added Silber, who thinks "the Obama administration has been played" by the Sudanese government, long spoken of, even by its critics, as a wily and adroit player of international politics.

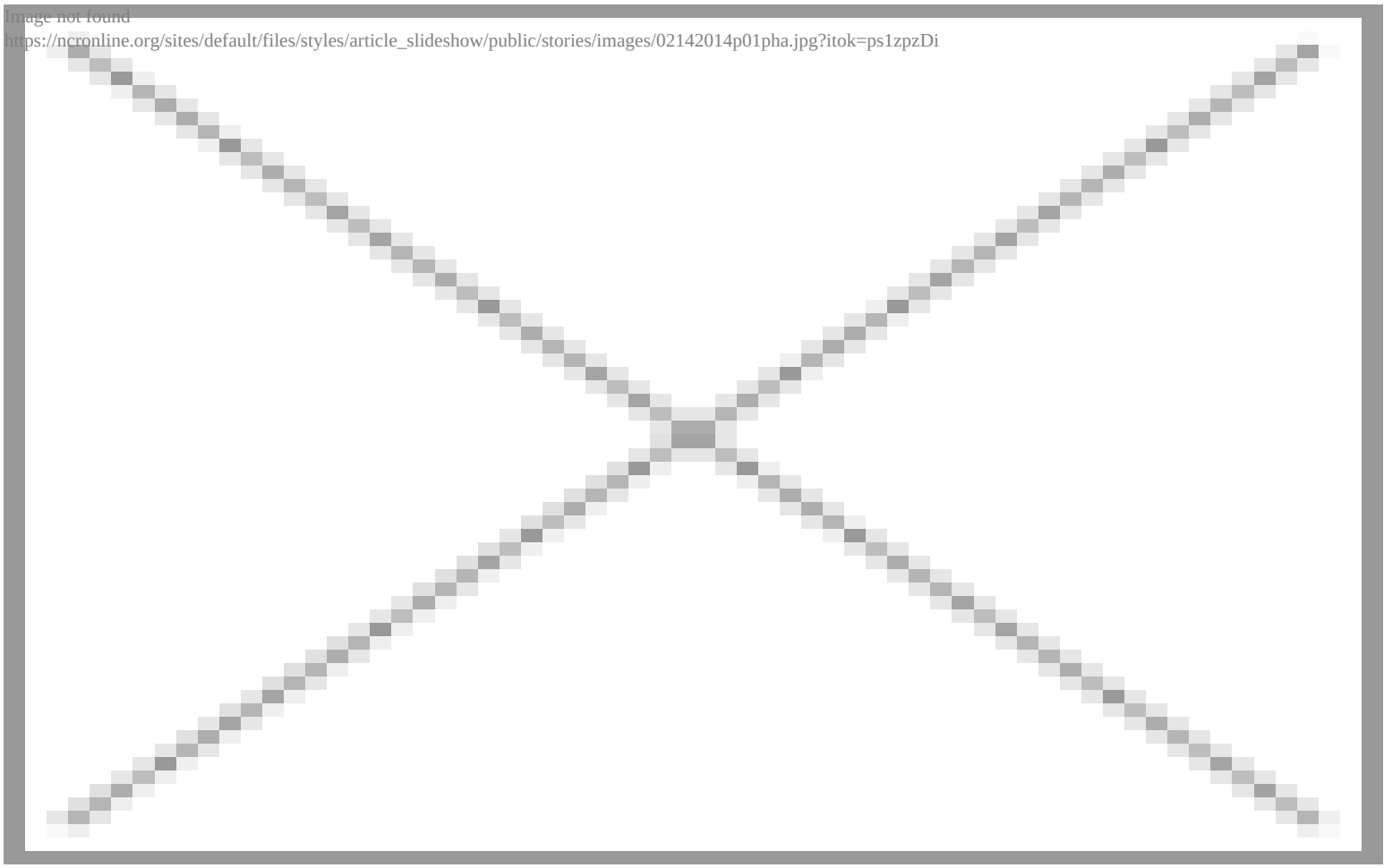
As for Obama, the onetime U.S. senator from Illinois called genocide "a stain on our souls." But the lack of visibility on Darfur by his administration, activists argue, is prompting them to call for a more robust "civilian protection-oriented policy" on Darfur and Sudan. That is a cornerstone of a campaign the group Act for Sudan is calling "Obama's Stained Legacy."

The campaign argues that Obama's policy on Darfur "has failed to prevent the tragic loss of countless lives and the mass displacement and starvation of countless more innocent people." Unless Obama acts now "to protect innocent civilians from their genocidal government," the activist group said, "he will ultimately be remembered for his stained legacy on genocide."

Activists say it is up to them to keep the pressure on -- and that can be daunting work. "It's very frustrating," Adam said at a Columbia University coffee shop in late January. "We're not in a post-genocide, post-conflict situation."

He paused, looking out toward the campus. "Sometimes I understand the fatigue. But I tell people to refocus. 'It's not over,' I tell them. 'It's not over.' "

[Chris Herlinger has reported on Darfur for *NCR* and is the co-author of the book *Where Mercy Fails: Darfur's Struggle to Survive*. He is also the senior writer for the humanitarian agency Church World Service.]



An internally displaced woman feeds her child near an African Union/United Nations Mission in Darfur base near Labado, Sudan, Dec. 9. (Reuters/Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah)

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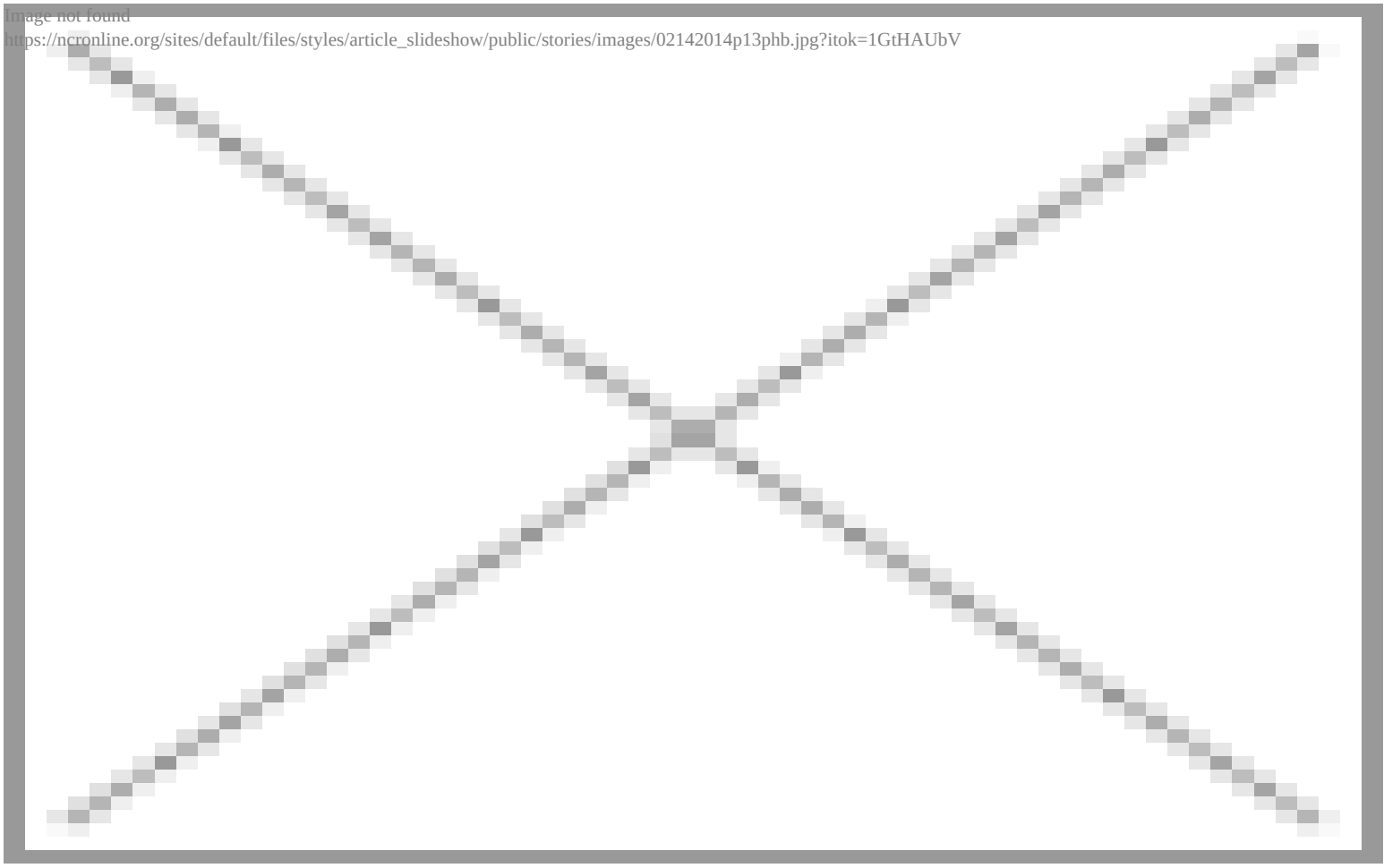
Children watch an Egyptian United Nations/African Union soldier standing guard in Abu Shok camp, in al-Fasher, the capital of North Darfur state, on Dec. 16. (Newscom/Getty Images/AFP/Ashraf Shazly)



Mukesh Kapila (ZUMA Press/Guillem Lopez)

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Ambassador Samantha Power (Newscom/ABACAUSA.COM/Dennis Van Tine)

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