

THE CATHOLIC WEEK

Sudan: Staring Genocide in the Face

By Don Berry, Ph.D.

MOBILE—Jerry Fowler, Staff Director of the Committee on Conscience of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum spoke to the Christian-Jewish Dialogue at St. Ignatius Marian Center March 1st, on "Sudan: Staring Genocide in the Face." Addressing the urgent crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan, his lecture was accompanied by vivid images of families struggling to cope with the traumas caused by violence and homelessness. (Many of the images used in the presentation may be viewed in an online exhibition at the Museum's website, www.ushmm.org.)

The focus on Darfur began a little over a year ago. Fowler visited Chad (on the western border of the Darfur region of Sudan) in May. For the first time in its history, the Committee on Conscience issued the highest level of alert when it declared a "Genocide Emergency" for Darfur in July 2004. Sudan is the largest country in Africa and Darfur, its westernmost region, is about the size of Texas. Six to seven million people live in Darfur. All outlying regions of Sudan, like Darfur, are isolated and typically ignored by the national government in Khartoum. Darfur is connected to Khartoum by a single dirt road and a railroad track.

The sense of neglect led certain members of the population to rebel in early 2003. It was the group known as "Africans" who reacted in this way to their dispossession. Opposing militia members identified themselves as "Arabs." Despite the titles both groups are technically both African and Islamic. When the "Africans" rebelled, the government responded by attempting to break up this large ethnic group so that it would no longer threaten stability.

Sudan's methods are to burn villages, kill the men and boys, and drive others away from their homes. Rape constitutes one method of brutality used by the Janjaweed to brutalize the "African" population. The Janjaweed are "Arab" militia groups, allied with, yet independent of the Sudanese army. Janjaweed use racial epithets, referring to their victims as "slaves" or "blacks" when villages are attacked. This corroborates the understanding that the crisis is not merely a political conflict but also consists of racially motivated hate crimes.

Those driven from their homes end up in the neighboring country of Chad, if they

are lucky enough to live within traveling distance. Some travel for two weeks through the desert to arrive in Chad. On the way, militia members often guard the wells and keep the refugees from getting water. Once in Chad, they construct makeshift huts beginning with green tarps issued by the UN. The isolated shelters are not organized enough to be called camps. Once built, the inhabitants of the huts are subject to frequent sandstorms, 115° desert heat, daily rains in the monsoon season, malnourishment, and disease. Residents of the huts respond with hope when outsiders appear. They tell their stories in hope that the world will intervene or in hope that a missing relative may be found. At times, they write statistics of atrocities committed against villages in broken English, so that the record may be shared.

Fowler estimated at least 100,000

persons have already died. The toll may be as high as 300,000. Supposedly, members of the African Union currently monitor a cease fire. It is clear to observers like Fowler that the catastrophe continues despite claims by Khartoum that it is "under control."

The speaker concluded the program with answers to the question, "What can I do." He began by suggesting that people "make noise." Officials admit that the response to Rawanda would have been swift if the public outcry had been greater. Other suggestions include:

1. Keep informed. He recommended information available at his organization's website, www.committeeonconscience.org
2. Contact the media. Letters and other contact with local media raise public awareness.
3. Communicate with the government. Representatives and others need to know the people care. This activity has already yielded more governmental response to Darfur than to former incidents of genocide.
4. Support relief and aid efforts.
5. Get engaged in your community. Take the word to churches and schools.

An organizing committee appointed by President Jimmy Carter in 1979 conceived the US Holocaust Memorial Museum as a living memorial. This included the museum itself, an educational program and a committee on conscience. When the museum opened in 1993, keynote speaker, Elie Wiesel interrupted his remarks with a direct personal appeal to President Clinton to end the killing in Bosnia. Later, killings in Rawanda underscored the need for a committee on conscience.

The tragedies in Bosnia and Rawanda raised the issue of the response to current acts of genocide as part of the mission of the Holocaust memorial.

The Committee on Conscience was created in 1994 to alert the public of genocides and threats of genocide: "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."

Fowler is a graduate of Princeton University and attended Jesuit schools for his secondary education. He claimed that his Jesuit education had a tremendous impact and greatly influenced his current commitment to justice. He has taught at the law schools at both George Mason and George Washington Universities and has been a scholar-in-residence at American University's Summer Human Rights Institute. Fowler was legislative counsel for the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. His publications include the essay "Out of Darkness: Preventing Genocide in the 21st Century."

On April 22nd, the Christian-Jewish Dialogue will present Dr. Al Staggs in a one-man play, "A View From the Underside," the life of 20th century hero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The audience is brought into the prison cell where Bonhoeffer awaits execution and listens to his struggle with evil, injustice and God. Watch for time and place.

Dr. Donald Berry is registrar at the University of Mobile and also serves as Director of Education for the Alabama Holocaust Commission.