

"Gender Cleansing" in the Sudan

By Phyllis Chesler

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The images from the Sudan are horrific: Wounded, starving, diseased adults, skeletal, dying infants. Some people have referred to this as "ethnic cleansing." Indeed, an estimated two million black African Christians, Muslims, and animists have been massacred by ethnic Arab Muslims over the last 21 years. Today, an estimated 1.2 million people have been internally displaced, and 170,000 have fled across the border into Chad. At least 30,000 human beings have been massacred by the state-sanctioned Janjaweed ("men on horses") in the last six months.

The United Nations did nothing during this time except condemn Israel for crimes it did not commit. The French? They are too busy condemning Ariel Sharon to notice a real human rights atrocity. Thus, the French continue to oppose UN sanctions against the Sudan. To their credit, the American House and Senate have just passed a bi-partisan resolution that defines the massacres as "genocide."

Still, although we are overwhelmed with images of suffering, one image is missing. We have no photos of what I shall describe as "gender cleansing." The systematic use of repeated, public, gang rape as a weapon of war cannot be captured in a single photo.

According to Amnesty International, eyewitness-survivors have seen girls as young as eight repeatedly gang-raped; their captors break both their arms and their legs when they try to escape. Women and children have described being kidnapped and kept as domestic and sexual slaves, and of being gang-raped every night in captivity.

The damage to a woman's self-esteem and sanity is impossible to calculate. Suicide, life-long anxiety, depression, and nightmares are among the many symptoms. To rub salt into the wound, Amnesty International reports that Janjaweed women sing (!!) to cheer their men on when they rape other women; they also utter racial insults to the women being raped.

Those feminists who immediately condemned Lyndie England and the American military as "depraved" in the matter of the torture of Iraqi male prisoners in Abu Graib are, so far, noticeably silent. Mind you: I am only calling for even-handedness; I am not defending torture or prisoner abuse.

As the author of *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*, I am not surprised by the behavior of the Janjaweed women—although the cruelty is rather breathtaking. Like men, women also internalize sexist values and are capable of both cruelty and compassion. Women are mainly cruel towards other women. Like men, many women cling to the status quo, even to one that demeans them.

While rape has been used as a weapon, not merely as a spoil of war, before, most notably in Algeria, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Afghanistan, there is something uniquely sadistic going on in Sudan. The women who are being gang-raped by Arab Islamists are also women who have been genitally mutilated (either clitoridectomized or infibulated). These crude, mutilating "surgeries," often conducted by village women, result in tissue scarring and loss of elasticity. (Infibulation involves leaving only a small opening for urination and menstruation. Normally, these women have to be cut open wide enough for intercourse when they marry).

Repeated rape must be excruciatingly painful and must cause severe physical and psychological damage. The rape victims (who are Muslims as well as Christians and animists), have been raised to view their genitalia as "unclean" and shameful. Tribal honor is bound up with female chastity—this is why rape as a tactic is being used to destroy not only the individual woman but also her entire social fabric. Many Sudanese women have been taught that sexual activity—including rape—is always the woman's fault. Some Sudanese tribes believe that a pregnancy cannot result from rape; thus, raped women who become pregnant will be suspected of having voluntary sex with the enemy.

Amnesty International believes that many raped women are not reporting their rapes. They fear their families will ostracize them; perhaps they also blame themselves for the shame they have brought on their families and tribes. If they are pregnant, their families will never accept a baby born of rape.

Honorably, the United States calls it genocide. The Sudan Campaign: A Coalition to Stop Genocide, Slavery, Starvation, and Religious Persecution has organized arrests and hunger strikes at the Sudanese Embassy in Washington D. C.

But, where are the leftists and feminists who are so quick to condemn both America and Israel for "ethnic cleansing" and racism?

I am on many feminist academic and activist listserv groups. During the last two months, the matter of the Sudan has not commanded much attention. What has? Defeating Bush, cosmetic surgery, discrimination against transgendered people, defeating Bush, gay marriage, abortion, defeating Bush.

Make no mistake. I am in favor of elective surgery and abortion, and against discrimination, but I am puzzled by the isolationism and self-involvement of activists who should be part of making a difference.

I understand that the situation in Sudan is politically and practically complicated. Technically, rebel groups did oppose the government which, in turn, set the Janjaweed militia loose on them. Can food and medicine be safely distributed without being siphoned off by corrupt warlords? Will sanctions only hurt the most vulnerable people? Will nothing short of a full-scale military invasion really stop the genocide and the "gender cleansing?" Dare America—which has been so defamed because of Afghanistan and Iraq—invalidate Sudan?

During the European Holocaust, people did not see the photos or receive reports of the genocide in process. In the

matter of the Sudan, we cannot claim that "we did not know," "no one told us." We know. We have heard and seen everything. To do nothing renders us complicit in what is happening. Those who survive such torture in war are more haunted by what the presumably good people failed to do than they are by the criminals whose evil character is already well known to their victims.

May we never have to learn this from first-hand experience.

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