

Genocide is not negotiable

John Morlino

Humanitarian aid notwithstanding, the international community has done little more than watch while the Sudanese military and its government-sponsored militias have killed 400,000 people and violently displaced 2 million more in Darfur. On top of this nightmare, women and young girls who have, thus far, survived continue to face the terrifying prospect of rape whenever they leave their refugee camps in search of firewood or water.

With the death toll mirroring the midpoint of the Rwandan genocide, the African Union and United Nations finally appear ready to call for the placement of a full-fledged U.N. peacekeeping operation in western Sudan. Yet, according to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the deployment of such a force is contingent upon receiving permission from the perpetrators.

This Kafkaesque scenario cannot be allowed to play out like the ill-fated "African problem requiring an African solution" mantra, which resulted in the fallacy that the mere presence of inexperienced, ill-equipped and undermanned AU observers could ensure the safety of millions of defenseless civilians. A three-year dissent into hell tragically underscores that myth.

In the coming days, all eyes will be focused on the U.N. Security Council, led, this month, by the United States. With contingency plans under way, expectations are that the U.S. will formally introduce a resolution calling for the aforementioned protection force. Still, even if such a measure is passed — and that is by no means guaranteed, given China and Russia's special interests in Sudanese oil and arms sales, respectively — there remains the issue of securing the Khartoum government's "approval" of such an intervention. This kind of insane thinking must come to an end, once and for all.

With or without the backing of the Security Council — and regardless of Sudan's posturing — the United States, fellow members of NATO



AP file photo

Sudanese women stand in the Zam Zam refugee camp near El-Fashir in the Darfur region of Sudan.

and the European Union should not hesitate to place a robust peacekeeping force, equipped with a mandate to protect innocent civilians, in Darfur. This step would be consistent with the obligation that most Western countries, including the U.S., have undertaken as signatories to the International Convention Against Genocide: To use whatever means necessary to stop this type of mass murder. For pre-

cedent, one needs to look back no further than 1999 when tens of thousands of NATO troops helped bring an end to the ethnic massacres in Kosovo, following Russia's opposition to a proposed U.N. mission.

The horrific results of political expediency and indifference during this crisis can never be erased. But if there is any hope of humanity regaining its moral conscience,

global leaders must now take decisive action to demonstrate what the rest of us already know: Genocide is not negotiable.

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Virginia's General Assembly runs at a whirlwind pace

David S. Kerr

The Virginia General Assembly, known in colonial times as the House of Burgesses, is the oldest legislative body in North America. Its members included many of our Founding Fathers.

Patrick Henry gave his famous "give me liberty or give me death" speech before the Burgesses. Today's Assembly, as it did so long ago, still weighs the important issues of the day, but it does so at a pace that would exhaust the Founding Fathers. In many ways, it's that pace — sometimes more than the issues they consider — that has come to define how the Assembly gets its work done.

The schedule for legislation is always tight. The assembly alternates each year between 60- and 90-day sessions which means there isn't much time to

waste. This year the delegates and senators have introduced nearly 4,000 bills. Just to manage this workload the General Assembly operates with absolute deadlines, committee meetings that run almost non-stop, strict limits on debate and a desperate desire to stay on schedule. In years past, when the culture in Richmond was less partisan and the issues simpler, the pace was slower. But that time is no longer.

The bills run the gamut, from the serious to the comical and, of course, many aren't that consequential. For instance, there are some 80 bills commending Virginians for various good deeds and community service. There is even one that commends the Chantilly High School football team for winning the Division 3 championship. Another 100 or so bills express the assem-

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bly's sadness over the passing of a local citizen.

Then there are bills that raise an eyebrow or two. Last year there was a bill to make it illegal to wear baggy trousers. At the time, baggy trousers were a very "in" thing, but often associated with dangerous-looking rappers and gangsters. Some delegates thought that a ban on this kind of outward might put a dent in the gang problem. But that bill failed the laugh test. However, my favorite — which showed the Assembly has a good sense humor — designated the "big-eared brown bat" as Virginia's official cave dwelling reclus. That one made it into law.

On a more serious note, there are bills in support of the governor's initiatives to raise gas taxes and allow localities more latitude in controlling growth. There are bills

to reorganize the metro board and several supporting expansion of Metrorail all the way to Dulles. A host of other bills deal with abortion. One of the principal abortion opponents in the legislature, Del. Bob Marshall from Prince William, has several bills in the queue. Each of these could take up an entire session if it weren't for the limits on debate.

Fortunately, the committee system, when faced with this mass of legislation, runs like a military operation. Many bills are dispensed with in a minute or so. But time is short and only the bills with a little steam behind them make it to the floor and then with strict rules governing debate. According to the Assembly's rules, each house has to have the bills it plans to send to the other house voted on by no later than Feb. 14. It's called "cross-over day" and if

one house or the other hasn't approved a bill by then, it has to wait until next year.

Amazingly, in spite of the near frantic swirl of activity, the assembly usually accomplishes a great deal in roughly 60 days or so. Whether it's sorting out the complexity of the annual budget, enacting the highly contentious parental notification law or even a bill naming a chunk of Columbia Pike after Thurgood Marshall, it passes a surprising amount of legislation. But it's a pace that some of its early members, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and George Mason — accustomed to the slower and more deliberative process of their era — probably wouldn't have enjoyed.

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