

## Darfur is Closer than Ever

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The United Nations Environment Program's (UNEP) report on Darfur issued last week is an important document. First, because of its accurate detailing of the processes that Sudan and East Africa have undergone since the 1980s, which brought about the current humanitarian crisis in Darfur. Crops that failed to prosper for years, chronic hunger, the disappearance of the state's already meager ability to ease those plights, the collapse of social support networks, the arms race, and terrorism by gangs that fought over what little food remained and control of whatever foreign aid arrived.

The statistics are spine-chilling: more than 400,000 dead, hundreds of thousands uprooted, an entire culture on the brink of destruction.

The report is another sad chapter in the inevitable tale of a crowded and poor continent, where flimsy resources, brutal post-colonial politics and an intolerable dependence on wealthy nations turned it into a land that devours its own.

The disaster in Darfur comes across as something taking place in another universe, in a land that time forgot. The only way it touches our lives is through the burden of conscience and emotion television broadcasts manage to create. Even the small groups of refugees popping up recently in the Negev, at the end of a journey on foot through Egypt and Sinai, have not managed to strike a clearer connection between the hell over there and ordinary life here.

This Darfur report is important also because of its authors' explicit statement on the broader context in which the Darfur tragedy must be understood: global warming. The scientific information makes it clear that it was global climate changes that caused Africa's fertile regions to retreat southward toward the equator, shifting the populated areas along with them.

That turns global warming from a minor plot element into the frame narrative, and focuses what is happening in Darfur on a man-made cause.

Africa's residents are paying with their lives, health and homes for something that happened far away and is not under their control. They and their culture are dying out because of the pollution - that byproduct of the same industrialization that brought riches and abundance to others while barely improving the lives of Africans.

The increase over the past decade in scientific knowledge about climate change, which makes it possible to relate regional and even local climatic events to the big climate picture, makes the Darfur report a global warning sign. The report tells us that climate change is part of the past and present, and that whoever puts off dealing with

global warming for another time is endangering the entire world.

The pictures of starving Africans that shaped public consciousness 20 years ago and the scientific models that Al Gore now presents in laymen's terms are parts of the same picture. The tragedy of Darfur, like other humanitarian disasters, is a reminder that lands may not move, but the time that forgets them travels fast, and climate change might turn more fertile dales into the valley of the shadow of death.

Up until a year or two ago, it was still hard to focus attention on global warming. The phenomenon was perceived to be unrealistic, gradual, questionable. When newspaper and television editors encountered scientific text on suffering expected to occur some day to nameless people who live far away, they relegated it to secondary slots. The link made in the current report between a known reality in a given locale and the major issue of global warming, the one taking place everywhere and therefore nowhere, is vital to the requisite change in consciousness - which is happening already, albeit slowly and too late.

There is something to be done to reduce the damage of climate change and save tens of millions in this century. But it all begins with reducing the awareness gap - the one that enables us to blissfully ignore the connection between the fuel-burning lifestyle of industrialized nations and the suffering of others