

Americans Favor More U.S. Action in Darfur

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Support U.S. Enforcement of No-Fly Zone and Sending NATO Troops

By Angela Stephens

The crisis in Sudan's western Darfur region, which began in 2003, has largely been pushed off the international news pages by escalating violence in Iraq and tension over Iran's nuclear program. Yet despite Americans' weariness of the Iraq war, a new poll by Zogby International finds strong support for greater efforts to stop the killing—what many, including the Bush administration, call a genocide—in Darfur.

Seven in 10 support the United States imposing a “no-fly zone” over Darfur to prevent Sudanese planes from bombing civilians. Majorities of both Republicans and Democrats backed the idea of a no-fly zone over the region, where more than 180,000 have been killed and more than 2 million displaced, according to figures from the United Nations.

More broadly, the poll found that 62 percent agree that the United States “has a responsibility to help stop the killing in the Darfur region” and that 58 percent believe “more can be done” by the United States “to help end the crisis in Sudan.”

President Bush has called for more NATO involvement in Darfur. NATO Secretary General Jaap De Hoop Scheffer said this week during a meeting with Bush that NATO is prepared to support a U.N. force in Darfur.

Americans have expressed their readiness to back such an effort. A June 2005 Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) poll asked if NATO, including the United States, should assist the African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur. Seventy-one percent said that it should, while only 21 percent said it should not. Sixty-one percent said the members of the United Nations should “step in with military force to stop the violence in Darfur,” while 32 percent said it should not do so.

Perhaps most significant, 54 percent said in the PIPA poll that the United States “should be willing” to contribute troops to a military operation in Darfur if other members of the U.N. are willing, while 39 percent said the United States should not be willing.

The wide support among Americans for action in Sudan is consistent with findings of several polls by PIPA. When the word “genocide” has been used to describe the conflict, as was done in a December 2004 PIPA poll, support for U.N. military action was especially high—74 percent said the U.N. should step in with military force. Just 17 percent said it should not.

Support among Americans has been high for an international response in Darfur even when respondents were unfamiliar with the crisis. When PIPA first polled on the Darfur

issue in July 2004, 84 percent of respondents had heard little to nothing about the situation. Yet 69 percent said that if the U.N. were to determine that genocide is occurring in Darfur, then the U.N., including the United States, should act to stop it, even if it requires military force.

The Darfur crisis, which the United Nations in 2004 called the world's worst humanitarian crisis, began in early 2003 when Darfuris took up arms against the government, accusing it of severely neglecting the impoverished region. Militiamen backed by the government, called janjaweed, responded to the rebellion by torching villages and allegedly committing atrocities. There is a racial element to the fighting, with the Arab janjaweed allegedly using racial slurs against the black Darfuris.

The African Union agreed to extend the mandate of the African peacekeeping force in Darfur through September, at which time it will be merged into a larger U.N. force. But Sudan, which reluctantly accepted the African Union force, said last month that it will reject deployment of U.N. forces to Darfur. Some observers fear that escalating tension on the Sudan-Chad border will destabilize the region and lead to tens of thousands more deaths.