

## An Argument Against Calling Darfur Violence Genocide

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Michael Clough talks about his op-ed that appeared in Sunday's Los Angeles Times, where he argues that using the word "genocide" is both misleading and counterproductive when applied to the violence occurring in Darfur.

NEAL CONAN, host:

On Mondays we turn to the TALK OF THE NATION Opinion Page.

To call something genocide is controversial. To say that what's happening in Darfur is not genocide may be even more controversial.

Michael Clough is a former Director of the Africa Program at the Council on Foreign Relations. In Sunday's Current section of The Los Angeles Times, he wrote that calling the crisis in Darfur genocide is not only inaccurate, but counterproductive.

So is it genocide or not? Why is that word important? If you have questions about Darfur and genocide, give us a call: 800-989-8255. That's 800-989-TALK. The e-mail address is [talk@npr.org](mailto:talk@npr.org).

Michael Clough is also the author of *Free at Last: the United States Policy Toward Africa and the End of the Cold War*. He joins us now from the studios of member station KALW in San Francisco. And thanks very much for being with us today.

Mr. MICHAEL CLOUGH (Author; Former Director of the Africa Program, Council on Foreign Relations): Thanks for having me.

CONAN: First of all, as you point out in your piece, the word genocide has legal implications.

Mr. CLOUGH: Right. The word genocide's actually a very precise legal term that refers to the intent to wipe out, either in whole or part, a particular ethnic, religious, racial, group. I want to be clear in saying that I don't think that Darfur is genocide, as the piece makes clear. That's not saying that I don't think it's a horrific pattern of human rights abuses that demands a very serious response. In fact, part of the argument I'm making there is that we shouldn't have to call it genocide in order to try to mobilize people to act.

But calling it genocide really runs against what the actual legal definition of genocide is, and it's for that reason that very few, if any, of the major human rights organizations have actually come out and called it genocide. It's been mainly politicians and activists that have adopted that label because they think it'll mobilize the public.

CONAN: Well, among them is the United States government. And the way it is usually portrayed - it is that, of course, all of these people are African but we're using different distinctions here, that basically Arab tribesmen and this militia known as the Janjaweed, which works in conjunction with the Sudanese government, has been unleashed on African villagers, partly because they support a rebellion, partly for various other reasons. But why doesn't that qualify for genocide?

Mr. CLOUGH: Well, you said partly because they support a rebellion. I don't think it's partly because they support a rebellion; I think what's going on in Darfur is a very brutal counter-insurgency campaign directed against the villages that support the rebels.

I - there's clearly been animosities over time between Arabs and Africans, but in western Sudan, which is where Darfur is, there hasn't been this history of ethnic conflict. In fact, Alex de Waal, one of the people who knows the region best, has written about, you know, sort of the long-standing malleable nature of

ethnic and other boundary lines there. There wasn't, as in Rwanda or in other places that we think of as being heavily conflicted ethnically, a long history of ethnic tension.

It's much more political. It's much more directed towards the fact that the government there, just as it tried to do in the south and other parts of the country when it was facing an insurgency, has gone after the sea in which the rebels swim.

CONAN: And, as you say, the tactics are quite similar to what happened in southern Sudan during that very, very long conflict.

Mr. CLOUGH: Yeah, and two million people may have died in southern Sudan, which is part of my point is that by focusing on genocide we may be missing the fact that what we need to be responding to are gross human rights abuses, not to the labeling of a conflict as a genocide. And, as I say in the article, there are also other reasons why I think it's particularly problematic to choose that label.

CONAN: Well, one of the things you fear is that the use of the word genocide will, in fact, exacerbate tensions between the Arabs and the Africans who, at the end of the day, have to live together.

Mr. CLOUGH: Exactly. I mean, it's a mistake to believe that the Arab population, the Arab nomads and other groups that I identify with the Arab government in that region, aren't going to go away. They're going to be there, and peace in Darfur is going to require those population groups to come together. By declaring it a genocide, you've already set up a categorization that is going to make it hard for any of those groups to begin to sort of move beyond.

I think that we ought to focus on the real perpetrators of the human rights abuses, which is the government of Sudan, not on some ethnic categorization. And there, as I mention in the article, one of the examples of the dangers of genocide rhetoric is what's going on in Rwanda. The - in Rwanda we had what was clearly a genocide. I don't think there's anybody that disputes that. But now we have a situation in which the government that came to power after that genocide, which is a minority government, basically uses genocide rhetoric to carry out - as Human Rights Watch has documented - an incredibly repressive political strategy.

And so, once again, I mean, we've got to be careful of what the consequences of the rhetoric we use are.

CONAN: Would ethnic cleansing be a more appropriate term?

Mr. CLOUGH: Well I - Human Rights Watch - and I should be clear, I don't speak for Human Rights Watch anymore, I'm now a private attorney. I worked for Human Rights Watch for nine months on an interim basis during part of the Darfur debate. Human Rights Watch called it ethnic cleansing. Personally, I'm not even sure ethnic cleansing makes sense in the context. I think, as I said, I think it's a brutal counter-insurgency campaign.

We've seen other counter-insurgency efforts. We could look at the situation in Angola, or quite frankly, look at Vietnam. People forget, a million people died - a million civilians died in the Vietnam conflict. Many of them as a result of U.S. activities designed to eliminate the villages and hamlets and the support that was coming from the peasants for the Viet Cong.

So I - once again, I think it's - I would much rather focus on getting out of the naming game and also this even more important problem is if we're going to prevent genocide, or prevent gross human rights abuses, however we call them, what we've got to do is develop the capacity to respond early on in the cycle of conflict. One of the problems with genocide is that by the time something reaches the level at which there's even a genocide debate, it's already too late to prevent much of the suffering.

And so I think we need, in a sense, a coalition to prevent human rights abuses as much as we need a coalition to stop genocide.

CONAN: Michael Clough is on the TALK OF THE NATION Opinion Page today. He's written an Op-Ed piece in The Los Angeles Times that argues that the use of the word genocide, as it relates to Darfur, is both inaccurate and counter-productive.

This is TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

And let's get a listener involved. John(ph) is with us on the phone line. 800-989-8255 if you'd like to join us. John's in Jacksonville, Florida.

JOHN (Caller): Hi. I have a - first a statement and then a question for Mr. Clough. The word ethnic cleansing reminds me too much of an Orwellian term. It's basically newspeak - it's making a word, genocide, into something that's a little bit more palatable. And I was first alarmed in Bosnia when ethnic cleansing was used instead of genocide, and also in Rwanda I remember ethnic cleansing being used.

I'm wondering - I mean, as far as I know, the term genocide is a systematic elimination of a race. Under the U.N. Charter, it's also my understanding that they are mandated to intervene if genocide is taking place. So I'm wondering, is this actually a systematic extermination of a race by another race? Is it genocide, and if it is, wouldn't the U.N. be mandated to intervene and stop it?

Mr. CLOUGH: John, that's an excellent question. In fact, you've actually gone right to the heart of the problem with the use of the term genocide in this context.

One, it's now been, what, 20 months since people started to begin to call Darfur genocide. They did begin to call it, for exactly the reasons you've -genocide for exactly the reasons you cited. They thought it would mandate the international community to respond. The international community hasn't responded that way.

So, in a funny way, one of the unfortunate lessons of this debate is that you created a public consensus called a genocide, and you established that the international community won't respond in the way that it is theoretically mandated to do. In fact, one of the great ironies is that the same day that Colin Powell said that the State Department had found that it was genocide, he also said, well, but it won't really change the direction of U.S. policy. And U.S. policy continues to be a much more nuanced policy than you would expect in response to genocide.

Now, to go back to the question, I don't think that what's going on there is a systematic attempt to eliminate the African population. I think it's a systematic attempt to defeat the insurgency and the rebels, and that the solution is ultimately as we're seeing now, a political solution. Once there's either a political settlement or a change in government, I don't think that this is going to be a continuing conflict between Arabs and Africans, which is what the term genocide implies.

CONAN: John, thanks very much for the call.

JOHN: Thank you.

CONAN: Another thing you pointed out was that Darfur came to a lot of people's attention, not to say that it wasn't happening earlier, about the same time as the 10th Anniversary of Rwanda, and indeed, this was, in some people's minds, the new Rwanda...

Mr. CLOUGH: Right.

CONAN: ...what was going on now. But even in Rwanda, where obviously things happened a lot quicker, but in Rwanda, that was clearly genocide and the international community did nothing about that either.

Mr. CLOUGH: Exactly. And that period in time I think is actually very instructive. I mean one of the reasons that I'm so concerned about the mischaracterization is that there's been a boom-bust cycle in activism concerned with Africa. And what people now forget is that the main reason the United States was so slow to respond in Rwanda, to what was clearly genocide, was because of the disaster in Somalia.

In December of 1992, the old Bush administration made what was a generally applauded decision to intervene in Somalia. As we know, it turned out to be a disaster, (unintelligible) debate over why. But then the Clinton administration was forced to pull out of Somalia. Somalia is now - in fact, Somalia is coming back into the news this week because of continuing fighting. There's no state there.

In that case, you had this exact same phenomenon. The activists rallied to humanitarian intervention in Somalia. It created a set of consequences that no one was prepared for. And when it came to Rwanda, people forget, Madeleine Albright basically used Rwanda to send the message that the Clinton administration was not going to embark on dangerous foreign adventures. And so when we get these sorts of rallies we've got to be careful about what the long-term consequences are going to be.

CONAN: Michael Clough, thanks very much.

Mr. CLOUGH: Thank you.

CONAN: Michael Clough's Op-Ed appeared in The Los Angeles Times. His, and all the previous stories in this series, are linked at the TALK OF THE NATION page at [npr.org](http://npr.org).

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I'm Neal Conan, NPR News, in Washington.

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