



“Impossible” Victories: Changing U.S. Policy on Darfur



Photo by Refugees International

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The growing grassroots movement to stop the genocide in Darfur has achieved what many thought to be impossible changes in U.S. foreign policy on at least three occasions. The victories achieved over the past four years have likely protected thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of lives and paved the way to achieve the ultimate goal – international intervention to

stop the genocide in Darfur. Continued activism on this issue is critical to raising the political will that will push the U.S. to work more effectively with the international community to stop the vio-



“Die-in” at White House

lence and protect the people. As a movement of people defending Darfur, we must not allow ourselves to become hamstrung by hopelessness because we have not yet realized our ultimate goal of ending the genocide. Instead, let us remember our successes in changing U.S. policy to date and redouble our efforts in the campaign to stop genocide in Darfur.

“Impossible” Victory #1—The U.S. Acknowledges “Genocide” in Darfur

Africa Action began working to stop the genocide in Darfur in June 2004. After determining that the crisis in Darfur met the definition of “genocide”, Africa Action’s first campaign goal was to get the U.S. to acknowledge the genocide while it was happening. The assumption was that U.S. recognition of the genocide would necessitate active leadership in the international community to stop the violence and protect the people.

After the experience of Rwanda, when the Clinton Administration carefully avoided using the term genocide for fear that it would force U.S. involvement, many argued it would be “impossible” to move the

Bush Administration describe the situation in Darfur as genocide. At the time, Darfur was not on the White House agenda, there was no national coalition and few organizations were addressing the issue.

Undaunted, Africa Action and some of our closest allies practiced the politics of impossibility – the process of achieving political action when there is no apparent strategic interest – and paired strategic grassroots mobilization with savvy inside political pressure on key members of Congress and on the State Department legal team.

In July Congress voted unanimously that the conflict in Darfur



Fatima Haroun, a Fur woman from Darfur speaks to a rally outside the White

was genocide and on September 9th, 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell shocked many with his testimony before Congress that indeed “genocide” was occurring in Darfur, Sudan.

“Impossible” Victory #2—Breaking the Silence

Unfortunately, only moments after his acknowledgement of genocide in Darfur, Colin Powell testified that no further action was needed, and this statement launched nine months of silence by the White House on the topic of genocide in Darfur.

tion, peace processes, and prosecution of the authors of the genocide. It was clear to the community that this would be an uphill struggle in light of the fact that the Bush Administration clearly did not see action on Darfur as fitting into U.S. economic, political or strategic interests. On the contrary, intelligence sharing with Khartoum and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between North and South Sudan were the clear U.S. priorities. Darfur was not even on the list. Engaging again in the politics

of impossibility, the movement escalated advocacy. Mobilizing a variety of tactics, including weekly “speak out” vigils at the White House calling on President Bush to break the silence, the community was finally able to achieve another victory and on June 1, 2005, President Bush referred to the genocide in Darfur and stated that the U.S. would need to engage with the international community in some form of action to stop the genocide.



Mobilizations at the White House (above) and Sudanese Embassy (below)



The core group of organizations focused on Darfur was growing and new coalitions and working groups were launched to work on a variety of strategies towards protec-

“Impossible” Victory #3 – United Nations Resolution 1706

Africa Action argued that the United Nations was the most appropriate vehicle for international action and continued to call for the U.S. to introduce a resolution that would authorize the deployment of a peacekeeping force of at least 20,000 with a mandate to protect. This force could reinforce the African Union troops on the ground in Darfur, protect civilians, secure humanitarian aid routes and build a climate conducive to a lasting and comprehensive peace process and the ultimate voluntary return of displaced

people to their homes. Again skeptics both inside and outside the growing movement on Darfur argued that, even if the U.S. were to be pushed to put forward such a resolution, it would be “impossible” to get it passed in the UN Security Council in light of the veto power of China and Russia, two allies of Sudan that historically oppose such intervention on principle.

The Bush Administration continued addressing the genocide in Darfur rhetorically, but resisted taking the

action necessary in the international community on the issue. It took a series of escalation campaigns that built waves of increasing pressure focused on the White House to move the U.S. to assume leadership at the United Nations and negotiate with China and Russia to abstain, not veto, a resolution. On August 28th, the U.S. and the U.K. put forward to a vote UN Resolution 1706, authorizing the deployment of a peacekeeping force of 23,000 with a mandate to protect civilians in Darfur. The Resolution passed, and China and Russia abstained.

The Politics of Impossibility

These three examples illustrate moments when even the advocacy community doubted its ability to achieve change in U.S. policy on Darfur. Yet, with strategic and escalating advocacy and mobilization, the political will was built to achieve change. These are not the only examples of successful campaigns. Those organizations engaged in work around the International Criminal Court (ICC) achieved initial indictments despite historic U.S. opposition to the existence of this court. Organizations working towards a peace process witnessed the May 5th signing of a peace agreement, and though that peace process was flawed and the peace did not hold, those engaged towards this goal continue to work to achieve a lasting political proc-

ess. Groups that worked for a U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan achieved the appointment of Andrew Natsios.

The challenge remains that these victories in U.S. policy towards Darfur have helped protect people but they have not reversed the situation on the ground. The international community has taken the initial steps, but continues to fail to implement its responsibility to protect and to overcome a political stalemate with the government of Sudan.

The current deadlock between the international community and the Sudanese government in Khartoum can seem to be another moment of impossibility. As we have already demonstrated many times

over in the work on Darfur and in the victories of movements on a variety of other issues and in other places, we can practice the politics of impossibility and build sufficient political will to overcome these obstacles. Instead of ceding to the decision-makers and accepting less than what is needed to stop the genocide, please join us as we continue to campaign for the implementation of UN Resolution 1706 to protect the people of Darfur.

