



**views, opinions**

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## **Building a tower of light to emphasize 'never again'**

By Elaine Leeder

Hope is seldom heard in the endless dialogue on genocide and other atrocities.

Civilians in Sudan's western Darfur have been desperate over the last five years. More than 300,000 people are dead and 2.7 million are refugees.



*Elaine Leeder*

Meaningful help has begun to arrive, but on a piecemeal basis and in insufficient numbers. As of last week, more than a year after a United Nations peacekeeping force was authorized, still only 64 percent of the U.N. African Union Mission in Darfur had been deployed.

Though peacekeepers were recently reported to have increased patrols to protect civilians caught up in this latest world genocide, their numbers are only half of what is needed. Meanwhile, violence against the innocent continues.

Yet, there is reason for optimism for Darfur and for a renewed commitment against genocide in both Washington and Europe — and here in Northern California.

President Barack Obama has installed cabinet officers who are speaking out against genocide more aggressively than recent administrations. Susan E. Rice, Obama's ambassador to the U.N., served on President Bill Clinton's National Security Council staff and experienced her own personal "never again" moment when she witnessed the bloody carnage in Rwanda 14 years ago.

Rice was critical of the Bush administration's approach to Darfur and called for "dramatic action" including U.S.-led air and naval campaigns to end the violence. Now, in her new role at the U.N. she is aggressively pressing for action by the U.N. and member countries to complete the full deployment of the U.N. peacekeepers. To that end, on Jan. 14, six days before the Bush administration left the White House, the U.S. provided air support to move Rwandan troops and equipment to Darfur.

Further action by the world community came March 4 in The Hague, Netherlands, where the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir on allegations of crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur. It was the first time a sitting head of state had been charged with such crimes.

Meanwhile in Washington, the new administration has a new tool that could help head off situations like Darfur.

A viable and realistic plan, developed by the Genocide Prevention Task Force, outlines how the U.S. and the world could create an early-warning system for preventing genocide before the killing begins.

Co-chaired by former Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, a Democrat, and former Defense Secretary William S. Cohen, a Republican, this bipartisan group of political and military officials concluded that preventing genocide is an achievable goal.

The report, released in December, was sent to Obama's transition team with the encouragement to make that goal a national priority.

The report also urges all Americans to build a permanent constituency for ending genocide.

That's what we are trying to do here on the campus of Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, with the support of SSU's Center for the Study of the Holocaust and Genocide, the Alliance for the Study of the Holocaust of Sonoma County, and victims and survivors of genocides of Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Americas.

On March 29 we will dedicate the Holocaust and Genocide Memorial Grove, a permanent outdoor sculpture that bears witness to past and present genocides, and declares our commitment to making the notion of "never again" a reality.

Designed and constructed by SSU art professor Jann Nunn, it consists of two 40-foot long railroad tracks that cross a footpath and narrow to within a few inches, ending at the

edge of a lake and the base of an internally illuminated tower made from 5,000 pieces of glass. For a video preview or live Webcam view, visit <http://www.sonoma.edu/holocaust/center>.

Funded from the private sector, in-kind donations and the sale of bricks that provide the railroad-tie support for the rails, the sculpture, its tracks converging at the column of light, expresses hope the world will learn from the past to prevent future genocides. Bricks are laser-inscribed with personal memorials to victims of genocide.

Brenda Flyswithhawks, a psychology professor at Santa Rosa Junior College, said the memorial allows people a chance not only honor the dead, but also “to publicly declare that these horrific events did happen in history and that we will not have them be denied.”

A member of the Bird Clan of the Tsalági (Cherokee) Nation, she added: “Genocide is not something that any of us would like as the focus of what brings us together. However, it is our stories of survival that bring us together. Whether we are Native American, Jewish, Cambodian, Armenian, Rwandan or the people of Darfur, our stories are braided into one. It is of the utmost importance that we do come together.”

We hope President Obama will bring a new and revitalized commitment to preventing genocide. For our part, we offer our Memorial Grove tower of light built on a granite foundation and inscribed with the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.:

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

**Elaine Leeder** is dean of the School of Social Sciences at Sonoma State University and a former visiting scholar at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Her father was the last member of his family to escape Lithuania before the Nazis began murdering Jews there during World War II. Her mother’s extended family in Poland was killed in the Holocaust.