

Darfur and Sudan Service: Remarks and Prayer

Welcome to the most historic place of worship in the United States, where tonight together we participate in a service of those daughters and sons of Abraham who gather in the name of justice and the fruit of justice which is peace. We come to pray together for God's gift of peace to a troubled region, Darfur and all of Sudan.

As at Assisi in 1986, when Pope John Paul II convened religious leaders for a service of prayer for peace, we have here not a service of common prayer but rather of individual prayer in each others' presence. In other words, as a person of another faith tradition offers prayers, we listen in respectful silence.

It should be a great source of pride for us in Baltimore that Catholic Relief Services and the other humanitarian agencies are headquartered here. Personally, I am deeply grateful to Ken Hackett for his leadership and grateful to the other leaders who have joined us this evening.

Four years ago in Rome, in the year of the great Jubilee for Christians, more than three thousand young people gathered in my titular church, S. Maria degli Angeli, Our Lady of the Angels, to discuss and to pray. It was a part of the World Youth Day celebration, which brought more than two million young people to Rome. We were English-speaking, and, following a discussion among small groups seated on the floor of the spacious basilica, there was a question-and-answer period, and I was put on the spot. The very first question came from a young man from Sudan, "Why does the West not stop our war in Sudan, which has gone on for some 17 years and has already claimed the lives of more than 2 million victims?"

I responded that we shall certainly pray for you and your people, but the sad fact is that no American or other Western television company has gone, as far as I know, to your country, with the result that none of us has seen the dramatic evidence of wartime conditions there. I promised to repeat his complaint in every setting at my disposal. Some of you may remember how I spoke at our bishops' meeting that November about the young man's complaint.

Recently the Bishops of Sudan spoke out. They said, "We also call upon the government of Sudan to open wide the doors for the humanitarian agencies to deliver food, medicines and shelter to the displaced people of Darfur. Assistance should reach the displaced wherever they are and without further delay tactics.

"We appeal to the government of Sudan to take positive steps as a government whose prime interest is the protection of lives and the respect of the dignity of its citizens, to sit and negotiate a just and peaceful settlement to the conflict. A government that violates the rights of its citizens should expect the intervention of the international human family. In fact this is mandatory of the international community.

"In conclusion we, the Catholic bishops of the Sudan, pray to Almighty God to rescue his people from the present tribulation and invite all those who yearn for justice and peace to offer prayers and assistance for the suffering people of Darfur."

Bishop Ricard's letter to Colin Powell:

"As many as 50,000 people have died, and more than 250,000 others face an uncertain fate unless the international community together with the government in Khartoum take steps to prevent further loss of life. Current levels of funding account for less than 50 percent of the actual needs. The United States, together with European countries and the United Nations, should coordinate strategies to move humanitarian supplies (food and non-food items) to the areas where the need is the greatest...

"The Catholic bishops of the United States are doing what they can. Catholic Relief Services is heavily invested in Sudan with a variety of humanitarian programs. We have called on U.S. Catholics to pray for a resolution of the crisis in Sudan and to participate in a special voluntary collection, the funds f