

Darfur Committee Report to the 225th Annual Diocesan Convention

The Diocese of New Jersey and Bishop Council convened the Darfur Committee to implement resolution 2008-1 of the 2008 Diocesan Convention which charged “The Episcopal Church in the Diocese of New Jersey to join with the government of the United States, the United Nations, and a host of other countries, organizations and individuals around the world to call and work for an end to the violence in Darfur,” and which called the Diocese of New Jersey to establish a committee to “study the situation in Darfur and provide information to member parishes and others about the crimes against humanity taking place there along with recommendations of actions that can be taken by parishes and individuals to bring these violations and actions to an end at the earliest possible opportunity and to provide support for Darfur refugees and other displaced persons.”

The Committee met for the first time on February 2 and, thus far, consists of the following persons appointed by Bishop Council: The Rev. Dr. Hugh E. Brown, III, Chair, the Rev. Greg Bezilla, the Rev. Sharon Sutton, the Rev. Jane Brady, Mr. Glendon Bell, Mr. Matt Bollinger and Ms. Alicia Graham.

The committee begins its work with a desire to study deeply and prayerfully, the human rights issues in Darfur and make appropriate recommendations to the diocese for faith-based advocacy from congregations and the wider Diocese and Church. But we also desire that the committee address the larger issue of the spiritual foundations for human rights advocacy and how the church effectively addresses issues of social justice and peace-making.

Darfur, which means “land of the fur,” is an arid and impoverished region of Western Sudan that has faced decades of graphic violence over land, and grazing rights between mostly nomadic Arabs, and farmers from native Darfur communities. Early in 2003, rebel groups began attacking government targets, charging that the region had long been neglected by the Sudanese government based in Khartoum, and that the government was using local Arab groups to oppress and destroy black African farmers in favor of Arab nomads.

The Sudanese government responded by mobilizing “self-defense militias” and refugees from Darfur have described government links to a brutal militia movement called the “Janjaweed,” accused of trying to “cleanse” black Africans from large swathes of territory. Refugees from Darfur say that following air raids by government aircraft, the Janjaweed ride into villages on horses and camels, slaughtering men, raping women, and stealing whatever they can find.

The United States government has termed the government response to the Darfur rebellion as genocide; even though that term can provoke debate, there is no doubt that crimes against humanity have become a staple of life in Darfur and continue as we meet in Convention. Millions of civilians have fled their destroyed villages, the refugee problem is immense along Western Sudan’s borders, and United Nations estimates of the dead from the Darfur War total 300,000.

Although Sudan’s President, Omar Hassan al-Bashir announced a formal “cease-fire” in November of this past year, and a joint African Union-UN peacekeeping mission, Unamid, took over in January of this past year from an African peace force, the intense violence, particularly directed against the civilian population of Darfur, continues; the International Criminal Court has indicted President Bashir on charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In early February, at least 30,000 people fled their homes in renewed fighting between the Sudanese government and rebel forces, which have now splintered and number in the dozens.

This is the context of the Darfur Committee's work.

We also note that violence continues in Southern Sudan as well, and the Presiding Bishop has issued a statement calling attention to the atrocities committed by "The Lord's Resistance Army," a Ugandan rebel group, which continues to terrorize people in the region, particularly Christians.

The Baptismal Covenant in the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church, in the United States, contains an often neglected promise which is a bedrock commitment of our Christian lives: "We will strive for Justice and Peace among All People and respect the dignity of every human being, doing so with God's help."

The Darfur Committee, above all, seeks to call Christians in the Diocese of New Jersey to account for living out this Baptismal promise on a concrete and profound issue of international human rights. We ask for your work and prayerful engagement.

Submitted by,
The Rev. Dr. Hugh Brown