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In Solidarity with the Prince of Peace

Photos of women draped in bright sarongs leading children through a sandy barren landscape capture the plight of the refugees in the Darfur region in western Sudan. Stories of rape and pillage told to aid workers through translators underscore the trauma and despair of a farming people forced from their land.

About 100,000 civilians have been killed in Darfur during the last two years with 400 villages destroyed and two million people forced to flee their homes. Neighboring Chad hosts 200,000 refugees and the human situation on both sides of the boarder appears desperate. Leading United Nations officials term this "the world's worst humanitarian crisis."

For people of faith the principle of solidarity calls us to respond to the sufferings of our neighbors wherever they live in the world. But Catholics concerned about Gospel justice sense a spiritual overload. Where to begin? The sheer distance and complexity of Darfur, plus the numbers and continued violence of the tragedy offer few realistic solutions. Yet, from this seemingly impossible situation, believers must develop a spirituality of solidarity to move beyond their paralysis. The spirituality that makes solidarity real joins personal awareness with a communal response: Oh, God, save your people—and how can we help?

First, the spirituality of solidarity engages the situation by asking what is happening.

Basically, Sudan's central government has armed and supported a militia, the Janjeweed, to fight on its side against rebel insurgents in

Darfur. The Janjeweed, a colloquialism translated as "horsemen with guns" or "evil horsemen," represents a mob of armed thugs - more than a militia that has rampaged through villages and towns killing men and boys and raping women. Drawn mainly from pastoral peoples of different tribes, the Janjeweed are attacking the farmers in the Darfur region to gain access to land and water for their herds. Another element: the government, located in the northern part of the country, wants to maintain strict Islamic control over all inhabitants of Sudan, which includes large numbers of Christians in the south where huge oil reserves are located.

Sending a sufficient number of U.N. peacekeepers appears the most expedient solution to the problem, but currently a few dozen African Union monitors are only documenting abuses. Nations, it is said, have interests not principles. Even the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in its 1991 statement, "A Call to Solidarity with Africa," says, "Sadly, race and geographical proximity as well as economic and political factors, it seems, can disproportionately shape our nation's foreign policy." They warn the United States against writing off the world's poorest continent.

While believers advocate for a political end to the war, they can support those who are part of the solution. In Darfur no fewer than 25 non-governmental organizations (N.G.O.s) assist refugees and the victims of war. Among others, these include Catholic Relief Services, Care International, Doctors Without Borders, Oxfam

and World Vision.

Amnesty International (A.I.) plays a key role in monitoring human rights abuses, especially with charges of genocide against the Janjeweeds and their use of rape as a weapon of war. More than resolutions and sanctions, A.I. advocates for strong U.S. leadership in three areas—"diplomacy, an arms embargo and a substantial contribution to the resettlement of the displaced." N.G.O.s on the

ground offer a perspective beyond politics—usually that of women and children.

The spirituality of solidarity transforms what first appears an overwhelming human tragedy into a ministry of connectedness. By study, advocacy and involvement, believers become a community of compassion while they invoke the healing power of God through prayer.

December 2004