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From the Los Angeles Times

Thousands Rally to Stop the Violence in Darfur

Washington protesters urge Bush to push for a stronger multinational peacekeeping force.

By Chuck Neubauer
Times Staff Writer

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WASHINGTON — Thousands of people rallied Sunday on the National Mall against human rights abuses in Darfur, joining celebrities, politicians and activists who called on the Bush administration to strengthen its efforts to end the violence in Sudan's western region.

"Let's tell President Bush he needs to do more," said David Rubenstein, coordinator of the Save Darfur Coalition, an alliance of 165 religious and humanitarian groups that sponsored the rally. "His heart is in the right place, but he is not doing enough. We need George Bush to work harder to save Darfur now."

People came from as far away as California to send that message and to hear such speakers as actor George Clooney, Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), Nobel Peace Prize winner and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel and Olympic speedskating gold medalist Joey Cheek.

The Save Darfur Coalition wants Bush to push harder for a stronger multinational peacekeeping force to protect people in Darfur. Its members have collected more than 750,000 postcards urging him to do so.

The conflict in Darfur began in 2003 when Arab tribal militias, known as *janjaweed*, began a campaign of terror to crush a rebellion in Darfur. The Sudanese government denies widespread accusations that it backs the militias.

The White House and Congress have described the campaign of mass killings and rapes of civilians as genocide. More than 180,000 people have died, and more than 2 million are homeless.

On Sunday, hours before a deadline for peace talks imposed by African Union mediators, the rebels rejected a proposal to end the fighting, the Associated Press reported. One rebel faction said the measure did not address its demands for greater autonomy and for the appointment of a vice president from Darfur, the Associated Press said.

The Sudanese government had said earlier in the day that it would agree to the plan, although there were indications that it did so only after determining that the rebels would reject it. The proposal could bring as many as 20,000 United Nations forces to bolster the 7,000 African Union troops that have largely failed to prevent violence.

In response, the African Union extended the deadline for negotiations for 48 hours.

Appearing Sunday on ABC's "This Week," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called on China and Russia to join the United States in trying to get Sudan to accept U.N. truce forces.

"Obviously, a peace agreement would be a very important step forward in getting this done," she said.

On Sunday afternoon, Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick issued a statement "urging the parties to finalize the agreement right away."

He praised the participation of the thousands who came to more than a dozen rallies scheduled in cities across the country, including Austin, Texas; San Francisco; Seattle; and Portland, Ore.

"People want a solution," he said. "Their activism and energy is commendable."

The rally on the Mall attracted 240 busloads of activists, according to organizers, who said last week that they expected 10,000 to 15,000 to attend. The National Park Service, which is responsible for events on the Mall, no longer provides estimates of crowd sizes.

Sunday's gathering under a bright blue sky brought together older people, families with young children, and students from a wide variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds.

"I heard that there wasn't a bus left in New Jersey," said Stacey Orden of Hillsdale, N.J., who came with 55 people from her temple.

"In 1944, when 6 million people died in concentration camps, the U.S. waited too long to intervene. Never again. And never again means never again," Orden said. "Innocent people are being killed, and women are being raped."

Nan Myers of Philadelphia said she wanted to "make our views known to the people who can make a difference to stop the genocide in Darfur. It is gratifying to see so many young people."

About 50 students traveled from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, even though they have final exams today.

"This is a lot more important than exams," said Joanna Zelman, 20. "There is genocide going on, and you cannot sit by and let that happen."

She and her friend Jamie Persons, 19, said they were inspired by the movie "Hotel Rwanda," which told how hotel manager Paul Rusesabagina saved more than 1,000 lives during ethnic violence in that country.

Rusesabagina, who was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom last year and has visited Sudan, addressed the rally: "What I saw in Darfur is exactly what was going on in Rwanda."

Seminary students Dan Peake and Kevon Gray came from Columbus, Ohio, because Gray had heard about the problems in Darfur while on an evangelical mission in Africa.

Anderia Arok, a Sudanese who came to this country four years ago and lives in Colorado, said, "They are committing genocide to get land in Darfur."

Peter Marcus, a Los Angeles lawyer, led a delegation of more than 100 from Jewish World Watch, a Southern California organization he described as opposing "egregious human rights abuses, including genocide."

"Darfur is currently our primary focus," Marcus said. "The rally this weekend is to draw attention to the issue. Genocide is a particularly sensitive issue in the Jewish community, for obvious reasons."

He said of Darfur: "The United States and the world are not doing enough."

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