DARFUR'S DRUMBEAT OF DISASTER:

There's nothing like an old-fashioned natural disaster to cast a news shadow over the human disasters we inflict on ourselves.

Consider the genocide in Darfur, a province in western Sudan.

In late 2004, the United Nations was treating the disaster in Darfur as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Then along came the devastating tsunami of Dec. 26, which struck the coasts of the Indian Ocean. Diplomatic attention and cash commitments shifted away from the slowly simmering African conflict involving tribal, ethnic and religious rivalries to the utterly straightforward, instantaneously devastating act of God caused by the lurching of two tectonic plates against each other. Attention shifted from a dry plateau in the African hinterland to more exotic shores. Darfur was cast into a news shadow.

Then along came Hurricane Katrina, a wall of windswept water that slammed the U.S. Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, 2005. Though the devastating storm no longer saturates the global media, the political and economic repercussions of this event resurface daily. Darfur where?

Then along came a magnitude 7.6 earthquake that struck the Kashmir province of Pakistan on Oct. 8, 2005. Cities were leveled. The death toll approached 100,000. Up to 4 million people were affected. Darfur where?

Then along came the February meltdown of mountains in the Philippines, where mud and rubble flowed downhill to sandwich villages between layers of wet earth. Natural disaster after disaster keeps Darfur in the news shadow.

Meanwhile, the genocide continues. Millions of innocent civilians and children live in constant fear as mobile paramilitary bands raid villages almost randomly in Darfur and neighboring Chad. Hundreds of thousands are displaced. The International Rescue Committee estimates that up to 500 people die each day from the steady drip of murder, rape and cultural disintegration. The Darfur death toll is anyone's guess.

Natural disasters command our attention. They offer high drama, whether through violent winds, billowing clouds of ash or the rolling thunder of seismic waves. They manifest the abrupt release of power, usually in majestic or coastal locales, rather than in stable continental interiors.

But they also command our attention by unifying humankind against a common enemy. The volcano that blows up an island (Krakatoa, 1883), the tectonic fault that sunders a city (San Francisco, 1906), the flood that submerges a lowland (Hartford, 1936) is the foe to us all, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The old saying "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" converts our anger toward nature into a good feeling of solidarity.

But the Darfur tragedy is of utterly human origin. There is no common enemy or great principle to die for. There is no decisive battle to remember, no D-Day, no Gettysburg, no Armageddon. There is no high drama, except at the personal level of sheer terror. And most dulling of all, the drip-by-drip killing is occurring in a place that could easily pass itself off as the middle of nowhere.

Darfur lies in the outback of Africa: south of the Sahara Desert, east of the Nile River, north of the African forests and east of Chad, which itself has been described as the "dead heart of Africa."
This is one of the most stable patches of real estate on Earth, a block of the Earth's crust called the African craton. It is neither jungle nor desert. It has neither coast nor major river. Though plundered by slave traders for centuries, there are no major natural resources, beyond the soil. Historically, this hinterland was a watershed between Arabia to the east, Egypt to the north, and the indigenous cultures of central Africa to the south and west. In Colonial times, it was a border land between French influence to the west, British influence to the east and other European nations to the south.

The bullet-by-bullet ethnic cleansing in Darfur is a human disaster. The physical landscape remains quiet as people die daily in the news shadows of more interesting and globally unifying natural disasters.

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