

April 6, 2009, will mark the 15-year anniversary of the deaths of Presidents Habyarimana of Rwanda and Ntaryamira of Burundi, whose downed plane ignited a raging genocidal campaign that left 800,000 dead—a great many of them women and children—in less than a month.

Four years later, President Bill Clinton would tell the Rwandan people: “All over the world there were people like me sitting in offices who did not fully appreciate the depth and the speed with which you were being engulfed by this unimaginable terror.”

In 2004, historians and international observers came together to mark the 10-year anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. As they did, many remarked on the haunting parallels between what happened in 1994 and what was then unfolding in Darfur, a region of Sudan roughly the size of Texas, where a brutal cycle of ethnic cleansing had already claimed the lives of 200,000 and made over 1 million refugees. In July 2004, the U.S. Congress—in an extraordinary act of bipartisanship for an election year—concluded unanimously that “genocide” accurately described what was happening in Darfur. By November 2004, both President George Bush and Senator John Kerry likewise had expressed that view.

By 2007, attacks on humanitarian workers reached extraordinary levels, while devastating malnutrition and catastrophic mortality rates for children under five became particularly grim signals of the enormity of the Darfur crisis. Firsthand reports of the genocide evoked the worst of the twentieth century: sadistic extremes of violence, unspeakable horrors inflicted on women and girls, and brazen interference with relief efforts. The statistics have continued to leap forward: As many as 450,000 have perished, and over 2 million displaced.

Without question, attorneys across the country now face a full array of stresses and uncertainties, both within and beyond our practices. At the same time, the reality of the twenty-first century’s first recognized genocide marks a unique moral imperative. This is all the more so because a number of grass roots organizations—as well as twenty-first century technology—have made it particularly easy for us to participate in efforts to halt the genocide. Those with very little time can make a toll-free telephone call to 1-800-GENOCIDE. The antigenocide hotline, brilliantly conceived by the Genocide Intervention Network, connects callers to their elected officials and provides updated information and talking points. In a similar vein, the Save Darfur Coalition has mounted a postcard and e-mail campaign aimed at urging the new administration to work with the international community to ensure an end to the killings and the safe and swift delivery of desperately needed humanitarian aid.

Bar associations, law firms, and public officials can go a step further. Hosting discussions or meetings with Sudanese survivors, aid workers, and antigenocide leaders; promoting genocide education and awareness; and supporting nonpartisan efforts to deliver relief to the victims are just a few of the ways in which we can go beyond “sitting in offices.”

Genocide is, after all, not only a humanitarian crisis but also the civilized world’s worst known crime. The late Senator Paul Simon famously noted that if each member of Congress had just received 100 letters from home, the Rwandan genocide might have been stopped. While the information age may have altered the formula, all of us—as attorneys and citizens who recognize the broader meaning of “justice”—should participate in efforts to end the genocide in Darfur. ■

