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PREVENTION AND ELIMINATION OF MASS ATROCITIES

Inquiry—Debate Continued

Speech by:

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Monday, June 18, 2012

THE SENATE

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PREVENTION AND ELIMINATION OF MASS ATROCITIES

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Dallaire, calling the attention of the Senate to Canada's continued lack of commitment to the prevention and elimination of mass atrocity crimes, and further calling on the Senate to follow the recommendation of the United Nations Secretary General in making 2012 the year of prevention of mass atrocity crimes.

Hon. Mobina S. B. Jaffer: Honourable senators, I rise today to speak to Senator Dallaire's inquiry on the prevention and elimination of mass atrocities of war.

Having spoken so eloquently, Senator Dallaire has provided us all with an insight into the harsh realities that many people around the world suffer each and every day. This in turn has reminded us of how fortunate we are to live in Canada; a peaceful nation that is based on the principles of justice, human rights and equality.

I want to thank Senator Dallaire for introducing this very timely inquiry and more importantly for the hard work he does on behalf of Canadians to stop the atrocities of war and to try to restore peace in areas plagued by war. I would also like to thank him for all the work he has done in Africa specifically, as this is my continent of birth.

I also take this opportunity to thank Senator Eggleton for sharing with us the role Canada played in Kosovo when he was the Minister of Defence. We all know that many lives were saved because we, as a country, made the decision to intervene and reach out to the people of Kosovo.

Honourable Senators Dallaire and Eggleton not only know of the destruction that war causes but have acted to find ways to save lives, and I want to thank them for their good work.

As honourable senators are aware, in 2002 I was appointed as Canada's envoy to the Sudan. For four years I had the honour of travelling on your behalf to many parts of Sudan as your envoy. I was able to travel both to the south and the north of Sudan where I witnessed first hand the impact war had on the lives of the people living in Sudan. At that time, Sudan had been at war for 50 years, and in many places in South Sudan there was literally nothing on the ground. There were no schools, no hospitals and no buildings. Everything had been destroyed, and I heard from a number of people that when something was built, it would not be long before it was destroyed.

[*Translation*]

The first Sudanese civil war was waged between 1955 and 1972 by North and South Sudan. More than 500,000 people were killed in the war. Unfortunately, the agreement that marked the end of

the war did not ease tensions between north and south. South Sudan wanted better representation and regional autonomy.

This led to the second Sudanese civil war in 1983, which lasted until 2005. Two million people were killed and four million were forced to abandon their homes.

Over the course of 50 years of war, more than 6.5 million people lost their lives or were forced to abandon their homes. This is equivalent to the combined population of British Columbia, Manitoba and Nova Scotia. It is unbelievable.

[*English*]

South Sudan has very fertile land and clearly could be a food basket of that region. However, at that time, and sadly even now in some places, the people of Sudan are forced to rely on food aid as they are constantly on the move trying to escape from the violence. I saw first hand the heartbreaking impact war has on populations and, more importantly, on the lives of children.

When I first became the envoy, I would ask questions such as how much food was being delivered to the area and whether it was reaching those who were the most needy. After a while, I set up my own unscientific way of finding out how dire the situation was in a particular area.

I would go to the nutrition centres in very remote areas to see what food was available for the malnourished children. These children were not just hungry; they were literally starving to death.

• (2050)

For a child to recover, I understood that he or she needed to be fed at least eight times a day. I never found a centre that was able to meet this requirement. The better-equipped centres would be able to feed a child four or five times, but the majority of the centres were only able to provide two or three feedings.

That is when I realized the true atrocity of war. War is seeing children whose stomachs are swollen and covered in loose, hanging skin. War is seeing a child's hair turn from black to blond as a result of malnutrition. War is feeling a sense of relief when hearing a child scream out and cry, knowing that silence is usually a sign of defeat.

In the south of Sudan there were so many places where the situation was dire, as the 50-year war had completely destroyed any semblance of government or even tribal governance. There were many places in the north of Sudan that were also stricken by destruction and poverty because of the war.

I visited East Sudan, an area near Port Sudan, where large ships would arrive with huge supplies of food aid. When I visited the displaced persons camps in that area, these camps were also lacking in food and other very basic and crucial necessities. I will never forget the day when I met a mother with four young children around her — two she was carrying and two were

clinging to her. This woman practically dragged me toward the sight of the port and said to me:

See all those tons and tons of food arrive at the port, but not one bag — not one small bag — is given to us. We starve while all this food is transported away from here.

She said she was forced to watch her children and her people die while the world ignored her cries.

Then, sadly, there was the great conflict in Darfur, and our Canadian delegation was the first foreign delegation to go to El Fasher where the fighting was intense. I was told we were being taken to a United Nations displaced person's camp. In my mind's eye, I envisaged blue tents set up in rows with food stations and people receiving medical aid. We were welcomed by the Canadian Army personnel who were doing a yeoman's job under very difficult circumstances.

The people at the camp had fled bombing and had led fairly peaceful lives, so they were in absolute shock and denial as to what had happened to them.

Honourable senators, nothing had prepared me for what I saw. There were no tents — just makeshift, torn plastic shelters. The water supply, which consisted of a single tap, had not been connected. They were still waiting for the food to be delivered. When I arrived, the mothers surrounded me and started to tell me to thank Canadians for the help we were providing for this camp, as we had given UNICEF money to teach the children.

I was in awe when these mothers were thanking me. Here I was, standing in the middle of this camp where the conditions were deplorable, and these women were thanking me for all our country had done.

Then it dawned on me: Parents all over the world want the same thing. They want what is best for their children, and what is best for their children, even in the middle of a war, is education.

Since then, I have been to many countries around the world. Time and time again, people, especially mothers, say to me that they want to educate their children. War does not rob anybody of the desire to try to live as normal a life as possible. Parents try to bring as much normalcy into a child's life as possible and they know the powerful impact having an education will have on the lives of their children.

I used to visit many camps as the envoy in Darfur. One day I visited the displaced persons camp in Nyala where I befriended Ahmed, a young nine year old. I had visited that camp many times and had noticed that Ahmed always kept his distance. One day I made a point to take some crayons and papers for him and sat next to him. After a while, he started drawing and I left. The next day, when I returned to the camp, Ahmed ran up to me and showed me his artwork. I saw all kinds of images that I pray no child ever has to witness. He had drawn a helicopter with bombs falling and destroying what he said was his village. He had also drawn people on the ground, covered in red crayon, which he said was blood.

After seeing this heartbreaking drawing, I asked Ahmed what had happened to him. He was no longer timid. He told me that the militia had killed his whole family. They had killed his mother, his father, and all seven of his siblings. He then went on to explain

that the only reason he was spared was because he had gone to collect firewood and missed the attack. He then joined the few other survivors from his village and walked to the camp.

War had robbed Ahmed of his family, his childhood and, most of all, his innocence and peace of mind.

Honourable senators, in the four years I was Canada's envoy to the Sudan, I saw many terrible things — things that to this day give me nightmares. However, nothing could have prepared me for my encounter with Samia.

In Darfur, I visited a house where babies who had been born to mothers who were victims of rape were housed. These were babies that had been abandoned by mothers, not because they wanted to leave their babies but because they were fearful of what would happen to them if they were brought home.

Here the staff spoke to me about Samia. She was two and a half years old but very emaciated. I was told that her mother used to visit her daily and sobbed when she left. Samia was unable to go home with her mother because she was a reminder of the brutal manner in which Samia's mother had been raped. Although her mother longed to be with her daughter, she knew that Samia would remind her husband of the brutal way that his wife was attacked and the fact that he was unable to protect his wife while she was being gang-raped.

Samia was paying the ultimate price. I used to visit her and got attached to her, but I will never forget the first time I held her. She was all bones with loose skin hanging on her, but all she wanted to do was be held and hugged. Samia, like every child in world, wants to be cared for and loved. I used to observe the agony of her mother as she left her little princess and, at times, I cried with her.

I often think of the pain Samia and her mother were forced to deal with and somehow feel personally responsible for their fate, as I was the envoy and always questioned whether perhaps Canada could have done more to stop war affecting the Darfurians.

Honourable senators, Samia is the reason we have to stop the atrocities of war. As Francis Deng, the UN's Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, states:

... prevention before situations escalate is the best course of action. Because if you engage governments early on, before they become defensive, much can be done to avert this critical choice between either military engagement or indifference.

We must remember that deciding not to act is a decision.

Honourable senators, we have to act to stop wars for the sake of Ahmed and Samia. Thank you.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

(On motion of Senator Carignan, debate adjourned.)