
Who Is Responsible? Confronting Genocide

Adam LeBor

Bob Ma

Is there blood on Kofi Annan's hands?" asks internationally acclaimed *The Times* journalist and independent author, Adam LeBor. As a person who spent a week in Sarajevo while it was under siege from artillery shells and sniper fire, LeBor has seen it all. He has worked in over 30 countries, and has written extensively about the fall of communism, the Yugoslav wars, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Israeli identity.

LeBor recently sat down for an interview while on a promotion tour of his new book, *Complicity with Evil*, which details the failure of the United Nations and its officials in the Rwanda, Srebrenica, and Darfur conflicts. LeBor accuses Kofi Annan and his staff of ignoring dire warnings of the impending Rwandan genocide, and of being on vacation during the Srebrenica massacre. Alternating between being stern and lighthearted, LeBor discusses everything from living on a kibbutz to the fundamental moral obligations of nations.

Kedma: Of the adventures you've had in your travels, which is the most meaningful and why?

LeBor: The most meaningful thing...When I was 18, I was on a kibbutz before I went to university. It was a left-wing kibbutz, and they had a lot of Arab workers in there from the villages who would come to work at the factory, but the Arab workers weren't allowed to join the kibbutz. I wondered why that was, and what the contradiction was between a kibbutz, which is a socialist [enterprise] and the Arabs not allowed to join because they weren't Jewish. So

that set me wondering about Israel and Palestine, which in a way ultimately led to writing about the City of Oranges.

The other thing was the summer of 1992, when I was a foreign correspondent. I spent a week in Sarajevo when the city was under siege, and I just couldn't understand why this was happening in Europe at the end of the twentieth century, that a modern European capital could be shelled and bombed and snipers firing into it and killing civilians and the world said nothing. And that week changed my life.

Kedma: In your new book, *Complicity with Evil*, you argue that the UN must become a tangible force in stopping genocide. But how could the UN cut through the red tape and actually get things done?

LeBor: When we talk about the UN, we have to distinguish between the three parts, the General Assembly, just a talking shop, the Security Council, where the power lies, and the Secretariat and the permanent officials. The Security Council needs to pressurize China much more, because China keeps the Sudanese economy going [as the] biggest consumer of Sudanese [exports]. The Chinese government has a policy of what they call “non-interference” in other countries' internal affairs. But non-interference is also a kind of interference, because things are allowed to happen. Nothing is going to stop the human rights abuses. Also America needs to do more here to pressurize China, because America has leverage over China. The UN officials need to really go back and read what the UN charter says about why the UN was founded, because too often UN officials are obsessed with the status of the UN and preserving its neutrality rather than using the UN to do good, which is why the UN was set up. It wasn't set up to provide comfortable lifestyles for thousands of children of corrupt politicians and dictators.

The officials in the Secretariat need to return to the founding ideals of the UN, and use the UN as a moral platform to try to revitalize the humane ideals of the UN when it was set up.

Kedma: You have commented in *The First Post* online magazine that the U.S. and the UK are not engaging in the Darfur crisis in order to appease China and Russia's oil and arms interests in Sudan. Can we hold these nations morally accountable?

LeBor: Nations can be held morally accountable, and they must be held morally accountable. Look at the Genocide Convention, the treaty to prevent it, and every UN member signs up for that. That treaty says that any country that signs it is duty-bound to stop genocides, so if they are not going to do that, then what is the point of the treaty existing? All UN member states sign up for the UN Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees certain human rights in theory. Only one-third of UN states are democracies; the rest are not. Nations should be. There is a very interesting development in international criminal justice, where for the first time government ministers are being indicted for war crimes. We saw that with Milosevic – at least he was brought to trial – and Charles Taylor from Liberia and a minister in the Sudanese government have been indicted by the [International Court of Justice]. The trend is towards accountability. And that's very good.

At the UN, the United States is the strongest opponent to sustainable development. This is morally wrong. There is a contradiction. America is a country founded on moral ideals, not a country like France, Germany, or Britain organized by shared ethnicity and geography. This moralism and idealism run through American history and politics and is commendable in theory. In practice, that moral vision has led to a moral superiority and a sense of not binding by the rules. I'm not a sort of reflexive anti-American. But, unfortunately, America's moral vision is clouded by American self-interest. I think a very good example was the Clinton administration in the Rwanda genocide, or rather its responsibility, in which Clinton, Tony Lake, and other officials were the driving force in not only *not* dispatching UN peacekeepers to Rwanda but pulling out the peacekeepers already there. Which was one of the most shameful moments in American history. No one was talking

about sending American troops to Rwanda. But they were so terrified of the prospects of intervention and American intervention. But they stopped any intervention.

Kedma: I attended the mass Darfur Rally in Central Park in New York City last fall, which was part of a series of mass rallies around the country to prompt U.S. engagement in the Darfur conflict. However, the U.S. administration has not responded to these rallies. It seemed like a lot of wasted effort. Do you think people should even bother attending?

LeBor: Certainly you should bother. It's good to be an engaged global citizen. For yourself, you need to know what's going on in the world. But it's very tricky to focus the energy. Too often rallies and celebrity diffuse that energy, and it's better to be focused and be clear to Senators that there are votes in this. Take certain steps – for example, divestment – pressuring the executive, the White House, Sudan; raising the issue, they will vote. That is what will concentrate the minds of politicians. They march for Darfur, then they go out for dinner, and they forget about it. You need to focus the energy and use it to do something more than this kind of theater.

Kedma: What about Live 8 concerts?

(Live 8 concerts refer to a series of benefit concerts held in the U.S., Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, and South Africa. They were meant to support the Global Action Against Poverty.)

LeBor: Live 8 concerts: they are absurd. It's just nonsensical.

Kedma: What are some useful ways to protest what is happening in Darfur?

LeBor: What is useful for Darfur?...Boycott the Beijing Olympics. Boycott the genocide Olympics. Then you might see some movement on Darfur. Not by marching around pop stars and lighting candles around Central Park. Think like a soldier: what is the enemy, what is their weakness, and target it.

Kedma: What is your opinion of the strong idealism in youth activism?

LeBor: It's great. It's very important. My only experience in university was exploring all sorts of things, through human rights, through amnesty, meeting Palestinians, [people] from South America, South Africa.

I spoke at a conference last year at Swarthmore College, and some young people had given up their weekends to talk about Darfur. You don't hear much about Darfur on the news in Britain, unlike [in] the U.S.

Some people will tag along and wear a band—it's trendy. It's an individual trend, to be involved with issues. And that is crucial, and that is a good half of going to university. A third is studying, a third is partying, a third is extracurriculars.

Kedma: In your *New York Times* op-ed, *New Lyrics for Israel*, you note that the Israeli identity, and not just the Jewish identity, should be emphasized in Israel. Can you comment on this sense of Jewish “inclusiveness” to the future of the nation, and how it relates to Jewish culture?

LeBor: I think in the long term, it's more important for Israel to make out what its identity is instead of the Palestinian question and the formation of some Palestinian state or quasi-state on the West Bank. But how Israel is going to remain truly democratic and fully integrate its Arab minority and remain a Jewish state is a much more complicated question. I think some of the things that were completely understood in 1948, such as the law of return with immediate citizenship to anyone Jewish, for example, are not so necessary now 60 years later. And they should be talked about, and are talked about. One of the great strengths of Israel is that it is a democracy. It's the only country in the region where these questions are debated.

Kedma: If you could create or destroy one thing in the world, what would it be?

LeBor: Hmm...that's a good question. I suppose I would create a viable and meaningful Palestinian state. One that would live in peace next to Israel, that Palestinian refugees could go home to and end their conflict, and hopefully herald a new relationship between Jews and Arabs.

Bob Ma is a Wharton sophomore. He is a freelance journalist and an NGO delegate to various UN commissions on human rights and sustainable development.