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Sensational numbers do not help the Darfur cause

From Professor Debarati Guha-Sapir

Sir, An unseemly fight has broken out in the US over how many have died in Darfur.

The US government and, in particular, Robert Zoellick, assistant secretary of state, have been singled out for criticism for having deliberately played down the serious situation in western Sudan.

The opposition struggle, led by the clearly energetic and driven Eric Reeves, a professor of literature from Massachusetts and self-described "non-epidemiologist", and a group called the Coalition for International Justice, claim the number dead in Darfur is more than 400 000 since September 2003. They came to this number by asking about 1,000 refugees fleeing into Chad following a violent attack if they had seen anybody killed. Applying this proportion to all of Darfur's affected population (about 2.5m) for upwards of 26 months, the conclusion of 400,000 was reached.

The State Department, from its own analysts, has put forward an estimate of 60,000-160,000 dead – a considerably lower estimate and closer to ones produced by our team in the WHO Collaborating Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED). These are based on 30 statistically representative surveys done by professional statisticians and epidemiologists, taking into account how many would have died in Darfur anyway, without the war.

The advocacy powers of Prof Reeves and CIJ are clearly stronger than their statistical ones.

Deaths of 300,000-400,000 are now quoted by the UK House of Commons, the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs and a series of respectable newspapers - including yours - making those who plod systematically through evidence and come up with less sensational figures look like uncharitable scrooges.

We are all convinced of the serious humanitarian need in Darfur and of the importance of pressing ahead with the peace agenda.

Using badly constructed numbers for sensational attention does not help the cause. As everybody in the humanitarian game knows, numbers, alas, are rarely a triggering factor in giving humanitarian aid or initiating peace negotiations. But unsubstantiated figures and exaggerations are easily discredited and do the beleaguered Darfur population a great disservice.

Europe and the US must continue - and indeed increase humanitarian aid - to Darfur, not because so many have died but because so many still live!

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