The whistle blower

HE ALERTED THE WORLD TO THE HORRORS OF ETHNIC CLEANSING IN DARFUR, YET MUKESH KAPILA DOES NOT THINK OF THE MANY HE SAVED, BUT THOSE MURDERED BEFORE THE WORLD ACTED. NOW THE FORMER UN OFFICIAL HAS REVEALED THE FULL EXTENT OF THE WEST’S NEGLECT OF THE CONFLICT

Portrait by Debra Hurford Brown

In March 2004 Dr Mukesh Kapila CBE was sitting in his office in Khartoum writing a report for the UN about the situation unfolding in Darfur. He held little hope, however, that his words would have much impact.

As the most senior UN representative in Sudan, for weeks he had been sending daily – sometimes hourly – reports to the UN headquarters in New York about the atrocities taking place in the western region of Sudan. His communications were met with silence.

As he typed he heard a commotion outside his office. A tall woman in torn, dirty clothes fought her way in to speak with him. Her name was Aisha. She offered her a chair but, fearing she would spoil it, she sat cross-legged on the floor. She had travelled from North Darfur, from a village near the town of Tawila, and now she told him her story.

She had been in Tawila with her family on market day when Arab militia – the Janjaweed – on horseback and in vehicles stormed the marketplace. They rounded up the women and girls and raped them systematically ‘like it was a production line in a factory’.

Her father, husband and two sons were in the crowd as she was raped repeatedly until she passed out. Huts and trees were set alight. In the aftermath, she couldn’t find her family and fled 1,000km to Khartoum.

Kapila was on the verge of tears. He had read reports about the attack and about dozens of similar government-ordered attacks in Darfur – wherein Arabs on horseback rode into black African villages and burned them to the ground after raping and murdering the occupants – but this was a testimony from one brave victim, sitting on the floor of his office.

It was the catalyst he needed to blow the whistle, to defy his superiors and throw the story open, telling the world that ‘the first genocide of the 21st century’ was taking place in Sudan. That decision, the events leading up to it and the consequences of it are detailed in his new book, Against a Tide of Evil.

We meet in the Frontline Club in London, a media organisation with an emphasis on conflict reporting and the place where he decided to write the book. A smartly-dressed, smiley man with a shock of white hair and a neat beard to match, he wears a plaid scarf to ward off the snow falling outside.

Relics from the history of war reporting line the walls. Torn flags hang behind our heads at the corner table where, over a pot of tea, he describes the ‘endless sadness’ he feels at stories like Aisha’s as well as the focus they gave him.

‘That was the turning point,’ he says of the encounter in his office. ‘It was on the edge and that tipped it’

Interview by Alice Wylie
over. I suddenly realised that actually I was free. It libe-
ated me to do whatever I felt was right," he says, if he
ever heard from Aisha again.

"This is my regret," he says. "Specific people are
etched in my mind. They’re in front of me now as I
speak to you. They disappeared and I fear the worst.
I know that those who wakened my mind, heart and
conscience in a very personal way, their courage was
far greater than mine or anyone else’s — and very defi-
nitely many of them paid a very serious price if not the
ultimate price." His voice breaks with emotion and his
eyes dampen.

Writing the book was a "painful and personal jour-
ney," and he was reluctant to do it at first, reluctant
to relive it. He had never given his full version of events
to anyone, not even his own family, but friends and col-
leagues encouraged him to share it: "I felt I had a duty
to write the book, that I was being a bit selfish in being
too precious with my own emotions and not sharing
the dilemma that others would no doubt also face."

Kapila grew up in India and studied in England. He
was employed as a doctor before moving into humani-
tarian work and he has worked in the aftermath of a
number of conflicts including the Rwandan genocide
in 1994. In Darfur however, he found himself on the
ground not after the fact but as the crisis unfolded.

He arrived in Sudan in 2003 as peace talks between
the north and the south of the country were being pro-
posed. Darfur wasn’t on his radar until reports of unrest
began to come through to his office. When challenged,
the Sudanese government dismissed them as squabbles
over food and land after a recent drought.

With whole families fleeing the region, the explana-
tion didn’t ring true so he set about finding out exactly
what was happening in the area. Reports trickled back
to him, of black African villages being targeted while
Arab villages were left alone, of attacks by groups of
men on horseback, of the implementation of a scorched
earth policy, of assaults by aircraft.

Since only the government had access to aircraft, it
was becoming increasingly plausible that the attacks
were government-sanctioned. Kapila’s fears were con-
formed when a senior government advisor talked to him
about the need to impose the “final solution” in Dar-
fur. The words were used deliberately and the inten-
tions expressed openly.

So began the reports to the New York office of then
UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the appeal for ac-
tion. It was “like being in a horror movie where you’re
actually watching the horror unfold and documenting
it meticulously”. However he faced a “wall of silence”.

He travelled to London and New York to lobby sup-
port but the powers-that-be were sympathetic but re-
luctant to intervene. The message was clear: he was a
humanitarian and his job was to provide aid, nothing
more. He faced a tangle of obscure diplomatic
words, the operative word: Anger at a very complacent
system, one which played games and did its calculations
without any consideration of human cost or the kind
of suffering of ordinary people that were casualties in
some great game.”

The UN officials in their glass tower in New York had
the numbers; the thousands were displaced, raped,
murdered. But Kapila had looked into the eyes of those
affected.

“The higher you climb in office, the more distant
you become,” he says. “The numbers are there but in
a bigger the numbers, the more abstract they becom-
e. In Darfur, meeting the individual victims and
perpetrators, I began to realise that each little mini sit-
uation in the big drama was utterly unique.”

“This really came home to me when I returned to
Rwanda last year for the first time in 18 years,” he adds.
“I looked at a room full of skulls and bones and, with
my medical knowledge I could tell how each individual
died; a blow on the head, a machete in the back of
the neck. And I realised that amidst the hundreds of
thousands, each death was unique and hence each sur-
vival was unique. From that grew the idea that I wasn’t
interested in speaking to the intellectuals or the policy
makers. I was interested in speaking to ordinary peo-
ple.”

All official avenues were soon exhausted. Accounts
continued to pour in to his office of weild being delib-
erately contamintated, of irrigation ditches being dynam-
aled, all attempts to destroy any means of survival.
Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps were being
attacked and looted. This was ethnic cleansing and Ka-
pi’s mind turned to a row he had made early in his
career: not on my watch.

Throughout the book he references that famous
quote attributed to Edmund Burke: “The only thing
necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do
nothing.” Here he was, a good man in a system of good
men who were doing nothing.

“What I learned from my involvement in different
war zones and crisis situations is that there are things
that happen by intention — ie the perpetrators — and
there are things that happen through the neglect of
others. My role in the various jobs I have done has been
about trying to stop the bad things and hopefully do
good things. For me it was very clear as I worked my
way through the system that when bad things are not
stopped it is by the cowardice of people who are
occupying office and not doing what they could do to
mitigate what’s happening.”

He refers too to a quote from Rev Dr Martin Luther
King: “There comes a time when silence becomes be-
trayal.” It was time for him to speak up. He arranged to
talk to the BBC Radio 4 Today programme. His inter-
view would be live so he wasn’t edited and he would
give evidence in advance notice of what he wished to
say.

“I knew that being the highest international offi-
cial in Sudan, anything I said was news. When the head
of the UN in a country, someone who normally occupies
office and totes the line and is very diplomatic speaks
out, that is news. That made me realise that the plat-
form I occupied temporarily was a very sacred one, an
office of trust and an office from which one has to do
good things. That gave me the courage to say what I
wanted to say.”

On 19 March 2006 he stepped into the BBC’s Nairobí
studios and, with no notes, gave “the interview of my
life”. He told how over a million people were affected
by the conflict, that there were eyewitness accounts of
mass murder, rape and looting, that a scorched earth
policy was being carried out. He described how humanitarian access was being blocked. His words rang out across Britain and the world: "This is the world's greatest humanitarian crisis happening right now and I don't know why the world isn't doing more about it. It is a human rights catastrophe on a par with the Rwandan genocide - the only difference being the numbers involved, not the means nor the aims. The government of Sudan is responsible for this, and they are guilty of ethnic cleansing on an inconceivably vast scale."

This final sentence was his bombshell. He was "pressing the nuclear button" on the story and on his career with the UN. When he left the studio he gave interview after interview as the story made its way around the world.

"I felt as if a huge burden had been lifted off me." He says. "Speaking up was a carefully calculated act. It wasn't an emotional outburst. There was only one chance to do it and it had to be done in such a way that it would completely change the dynamic of the world's understanding. It was calm, cold-blooded.

The world heard his cry. Darfur became international news. There was "a 180-degree turnaround within three months" and within three weeks there was a Security Council resolution. Action to halt the bloodshed followed, with peacekeepers on the ground within four months of his departure from Sudan. The international community had been forced to move quickly and publicly thanks to media pressure and worldwide outrage.

Still, he outlines, through some tears, his own sense of failure. When people tell him how much they admire what he did, he feels false. Actions were taken, but they came too late to prevent the worst of the suffering of the Darfuri people. He describes what happened in Darfur as "the world's most successful genocide."

"Let's look at the record. The fact is that the ethnic cleansing, the genocide actually did happen, even after Rwanda and Srebrenica. We all resolved 'never again' on my watch; and there I was, the head of the UN in the country. I did my best but it was too late. How can one actually take any credit when I myself presided over the first genocide of the 21st century? That's how I feel."

He is a man, I suggest, who judges himself harshly. He agrees, but he wishes others would be more honest in the judgement of themselves. Kofi Annan is one example. Kapila describes him as having "presided over three genocides (Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur) in a way". Annan was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001, something he describes as "a travesty of justice."

He describes Kofi Annan's autobiography as "a case for the defence". "He blames everyone except himself. In my case I blame myself as much as anyone else because I was part of the system I rebelled but could I have done more? Could I have done things differently? I've agonised over that for years. I haven't reached an answer, but I can take satisfaction from my internal values: to be able to speak up without fear of failure and regardless of the cost to me. For that I hold my head high and sleep well at night. But I wish those countless lives had been saved."

"Everybody has a responsibility and the higher the position you occupy the greater the responsibility," he says. He occupied a high position in Sudan and as such he felt his responsibility to Aisha and the thousands like her keenly. "When I talk about a sense of failure it is a sense of personal failure, of not being able to do anything even about one specific individual. In a way, one can tolerate collective failure because it's abstract, because the victim and the perpetrators are abstract. It's very difficult to do that with an individual victim and your individual responsibility."

After the BBC interview his days with the UN were numbered. He was all set to "take up gardening" but since blowing the whistle on Darfur he has worked with the World Health Organisation and the Red Cross.

Today he is Professor of Global Health and Humanitarian Affairs at the University of Manchester and is a special representative for the Aegis Trust which works to prevent crimes against humanity and to which his proceeds from the book will be donated.

And he continues to fight for the people of Sudan, who continue to suffer at the hands of the government; with the focus today shifting to the Nuba region where similar atrocities to those in Darfur are being carried out on a large scale.

What was important when he blew the whistle on Darfur and what remains important to him today is that the stories of those involved are heard; the stories of collective suffering and the experiences of individuals like Aisha. It is important to him and it is vital to them.

"People have said 'please tell others about it. Make our voices heard'. That, to me, provided a great deal of comfort as well as validation of my approach because I had no armies at my command. All I had was my platform and my position. By speaking out I was doing what they wished me to do. What surprised me was how anxious they were for the world to hear. They wanted their stories to be known because it comforts people to tell their stories, for their suffering not to be wasted."


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